

Paradoxe

*PIERRE BAYARD*

**AURAI-JE ÉTÉ  
RÉSISTANT  
OU  
BOURREAU ?**



Les Éditions de Minuit

# *Aurais-je été résistant ou bourreau ?*

Pierre Bayard  
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**WOULD I HAVE BEEN A  
RESISTANCE FIGHTER?**

**OR**

**EXECUTIONER?**

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In memory of Nikola Kovac and Fahrudin Kreho, professors at  
the University of Sarajevo, and Cambodian painter Vann Nath.

We who have returned and tell our stories often hear people say: "If I

were you, I wouldn't have lasted a single day." This statement makes no sense: no one can ever be in someone else's shoes. Each individual is such a complex being that it is futile to predict their behavior, even more so in exceptional situations, and it is not even possible to predict one's own behavior.

Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*

# PROLOGUE



Like many people of my generation, born in the years following World War II and raised on stories of that time, I have often wondered how I would have behaved in those dramatic circumstances if I had been born not in 1954, but a few decades earlier.

The question of what becomes of us in such a context has been frequently addressed by authors who have reflected on the interplay of causes that lead human beings to transform themselves, in situations of historical crisis, into resistance fighters or executioners. But the reflection is always general, without the authors asking themselves what *they themselves* would have done if they had found themselves in such a situation.

Convinced that asking this type of question requires personal involvement in the answer, I will not approach it on an abstract theoretical level, even if I must necessarily engage in some general reflection in order to arrive at my particular case. I will not ask myself how human beings react when they find themselves in this type of situation, but how I myself would have behaved if I had been in that position.

I therefore propose here, by transporting myself back in time and reconstructing my life, to examine carefully how I would have behaved during the Second World War if I had been old enough to participate, the choices I would have faced, the decisions I would have had to make, the mistakes I would have made, and the fate that would have been mine.

The obvious impossibility of such an undertaking stems from the fact that by transporting myself back in time and placing myself in a different context, I necessarily influence my current personality and cease to be myself, thereby rendering the experiment null and void before it even begins.

However, I will take the gamble that fiction can be useful for theoretical reflection and that it is possible to make this journey through time, a situation not so different, after all, from what would happen tomorrow if history were to take a different turn and I found myself confronted with a general crisis of values, and therefore forced to ask myself whether I can and should get involved.

To do this, I will have a character close to myself act in the past, who will not, however, be my double in every respect. This *character-delegate* will retain most of my intellectual, social, and psychological characteristics of today, while taking into account a few variables due to the new situation in which he will find himself.

The destiny I will attempt to give him will not be unambiguous. I will try at all times, and without making any definitive decisions, to examine the different crossroads in life where I could have found myself and the different paths I could have taken, studying each time the options available to me and leaving the infinite field of possibilities as open as possible.

Thinking in these terms implies establishing from the outset a concept that will be central to this essay, namely that of *potential personality*. I propose that we consider that human beings are not composed exclusively of what they are in the historical and geographical context in which they were born, but that they also include what they could have been if they had found themselves in a different situation, particularly in a situation of violent crisis, which is most likely to reveal, by pushing them to their limits, what they truly are.

This potential personality—which is another form of the unconscious—may remain unknown to us throughout our lives if we live in such peaceful historical and biographical circumstances that this personality has no opportunity to emerge or develop. However, at certain moments of individual crisis, it is possible to see it appear in the background in ourselves or in others, and to guess how it might have taken over in other circumstances.

But only by studying situations of violent historical crisis and the way in which individuals transform themselves, sometimes completely contrary to what we might have expected of them—for better or for worse—can we see how a whole part of ourselves, largely unknown to us and sometimes radically opposed to what we think we are, reveals itself in certain contexts.

For this reflection, the Second World War, both because it had a profound impact on my family and because it presented all the signs

of a general crisis of values capable of giving rise to singular trajectories, offers a privileged field of reflection for trying to imagine what I might have been if chance had made me be born a few decades earlier, that is, what I am at my core.

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Apart from the fact that the interest of such research lies much more in the research itself and the questions it raises than in the necessarily improbable results it will produce, I will not be starting completely blind, but will try to draw on three types of data, which will serve as guardrails for this imaginary dive into the past.

This data primarily consists of scientific laws identified by psychologists and behavioral specialists. No matter how much chance and

individual surprises life throws at us, there are a number of laws that govern our behavior in times of crisis, both collectively and individually, and some are so restrictive that it is futile to hope to escape them.

I will also draw inspiration from what I call *comparable situations*. While it will never be possible to know with certainty what I would have done in the extreme conditions I am going to study, I can, however, study how I behave today in similar situations, even if they are less dramatic, and draw lessons from this about how I would have behaved in other circumstances.

Finally, my third guide will be to examine how my family, and in

particular my father, behaved during the same period, since it was on the date he was born that I decided to come into this new existence. This is certainly a random guide, but if we accept that certain psychological traits are passed on from one generation to the next, it is not without interest to ask how

those who inspired us behaved.

\*

This is the outline of this book. I will first attempt to develop the concept of potential personality and, at the crossroads of historical and psychological reflection, construct a general model that will allow me to orient myself in what my life would have been like if I had been born like my father in January 1922 and found myself, like him, plunged into the turmoil of history.

In the following two parts, while recounting, step by step, my destiny and that of my father, I will examine the interplay of the multiple forces that confronted him and his generation and that would have exerted themselves on me at various decisive moments in my life, leading me to commit myself in one direction or another, or, on the contrary, to remain inactive.

Finally, in the last section, taking into account this dynamic of external and internal forces that tear us apart, I will try to get as close as possible to the mysterious point within ourselves where decisions are made that lead human beings to reveal their potential personality and tip them toward one form of commitment or another.

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There are several ways to read this essay, one of which is to see it as a reflection on reading. When faced with numerous texts that include scenes linked to violent historical situations, we formulate more or less clear judgments about the actors or characters without asking ourselves what we would have done if we had been in their place, a refusal that distorts our perception of the text. This book attempts, as honestly as possible, through the detour of fiction, to answer this question.

Another way to read this book is to consider it a book about resistance. The historical examples I will reflect on here will mainly be drawn from figures who opposed tyranny. The main reason for this choice is that that *becoming a resistance fighter* is, for me, more singular than *becoming a torturer*. For a Freudian, the slide into darkness is not enigmatic; it is part of the logic of the psyche to give free rein to violent impulses when the barriers of society collapse.

Much more mysterious is the becoming-resistance, that is, the ability that certain individuals demonstrate at certain moments in their history, contrary to what they are asked to do and to their objective interests, sometimes even contrary to their apparent personality, to say no. So it is not impossible to consider that this book, which attempts to capture the strength that lies within each of us but develops in only a few, is a book about God.

# OUTLINE OF A

MODEL



# CHAPTER ONE

## ON POTENTIAL PERSONALITY

The question of what we are capable of becoming in circumstances such as those of the Second World War was illustrated remarkably well in Louis Malle's film *Lacombe Lucien* (1974), based on a screenplay written by the director in collaboration with Patrick Modiano.

This film is interesting for two reasons. First, it raises questions similar to those that concern me here, since it depicts the journey of a young man, close to my age at the time, at the precise moment when he, like me, is wondering how he should respond to the events of the recent war.

But it also deserves to be studied as a social phenomenon, for the historical repercussions it had in France in the 1970s, where it led many viewers to question this period of history, to appreciate its complexity, and to view it in a more nuanced light than they had done before.

\*

The film is set at the end of the Second World War. The hero,

Lucien Lacombe, is a young, rough peasant whose father is a prisoner and whose mother has taken a lover, whom she has installed in the family farm. Lucien works as a waiter in a hospice in the city.

One day after class, he visits his former teacher, bringing him a rabbit he has poached, and tells him that he has heard he is leading the local resistance and wants to join. The teacher expresses his reservations, telling Lucien that he thinks he is a little young and that the Resistance, unlike poaching, is a serious business. The conversation ends there,

without the teacher giving the young man a clear refusal.

The next day, as he was riding his bike back to the hospice, a flat tire forced him to walk several miles, and he arrived in town after curfew. Spotting a house that was lit up and noisy, whose inhabitants seemed to be celebrating, he stopped for a moment out of curiosity to see what was going on and was surprised by one of the occupants, who dragged him inside at gunpoint.

Among the inhabitants of this house, he recognizes a former cyclist who had his moment of glory and with whom he sympathizes. This man and his friends, a group of collaborators, get him drunk during the night in order to extract information from him about the resistance in his region. Lucien, who has given them the name of the schoolteacher, wakes up in the morning in an office with a hangover and, moved by the sympathy shown to him by the group of collaborators, agrees to take part in their activities.

As he becomes part of the group, Lucien meets a Jewish tailor, Horn, and his daughter, France, with whom he has an ambiguous relationship, marked by fear and seduction. The two young people become lovers, and during the final debacle, when Horn has surrendered to the Gestapo, they flee with the girl's grandmother to the countryside, where they live for a while before Lucien is shot by the Resistance.

The film may initially shock viewers with its complacent portrayal of a perfect bastard. While the main character is indeed unsympathetic and unlikable, and is killed at the end of the story, he is the obvious subject of the film, with no scene taking place in his absence. And the fact that Louis Malle, true to his cinematic biases, does not suggest any condemnation of his hero may increase the discomfort felt by many viewers.

But even more than that, it is the way the film depicts human destiny that is likely to disturb viewers. The bicycle's place in the film is symbolic of the role played by chance.

Without the flat tire, Lucien would not have arrived in the city after curfew and would not have met the group of collaborators, and it is likely that the schoolteacher would not have accepted him into his resistance group. The fact that the first person to show interest in him is a former cycling champion ironically reinforces this determination of destiny by the bicycle.

The importance of chance in *Lacombe Lucien* caused a scandal in France in the 1970s. At first glance, in a country that had lived under the myth of widespread opposition to the occupying forces, it could indeed suggest that the choice to join the Resistance or collaborate was not based on ideological convictions, but simply on chance, since the same character could, within a few hours, depending on a material accident, switch to either side.

\*

This interpretation of the film is unfair in that it overlooks a set of causal factors that are much more subtle than they appear. Lucien's fate follows a path that is interesting to retrace and which, clearly, Malle and Modiano invented without any preconceived sympathy for the character.

What the film shows is the prevalence of psychological determinations over human beings when political determinations are non-existent. Untainted by culture, Lucien understands nothing

of what is happening around him on an ideological level, as indicated by one of his lines to the tailor Horn after an operation carried out by his group against resistance fighters:

Arriving at Horn's door, he rings the bell repeatedly for a long time. The door opens. Horn appears, wearing silk pajamas.

Horn: What do you want?

Lucien points his machine gun at Horn's abdomen with one hand and says, "Ta ta ta ta," imitating the sound of a burst of gunfire.

Then he enters the room, puts his suitcase on the table, and turns back to

Horn. Lucien: They killed my boss.

Horn: What?

Lucien (*threateningly*): Your friends wounded my

boss! Horn: What friends?

Lucien: [The Bolsheviks...](#)

This lack of political determination on Lucien's part gives free rein to psychological determinations, and the scenario clearly shows how these become decisive in choices that are only secondary in nature.

The first of these determinations is a taste for violence, illustrated in the film from the very first images, which show Lucien taking pleasure in killing a bird with a slingshot and, a little later, decapitating a chicken. This taste is then expressed in his fight against the resistance fighters.

The second determining factor is the unconscious search for a father

figure. In search of a new father in the absence of his own, Lucien initially turns to his teacher, who rejects him, before finding a substitute figure in one of the collaborators, Inspector Tonin.

The diversity of the two possible paths should not obscure the uniqueness of the causal system. Contrary to appearances, Lucien is the object of a complex set of determinations and not the victim of chance, even if chance does have, but only in the second instance, considerable consequences for his destiny.

\*

Louis Malle's film seems to me to illustrate what I have proposed to call *potential personality*, namely that part of our personality that only emerges and develops in exceptional circumstances, even though we may sense its existence in certain everyday situations.

Without the war, Lucien would probably not have become the criminal he turned into. It was the historical situation and the general disorganization of society that it brought about that allowed his potential personality, hitherto limited to violence against animals, to come to the fore and take over completely. One could, of course, point out that the film does not describe

only the future of a torturer, but also a hesitation between two possible futures, and that Lucien comes very close to becoming a hero of the Resistance. In that case, he would have to be considered as having two potential personalities, that of a torturer and that of a resistance fighter.

This would be to confuse the psychological register—which includes potential personality – and the political register. Lucien's potential personality would undoubtedly have been just as evident if circumstances had led him to join the Resistance rather than collaborate with the enemy. Although it would have taken other forms, his taste for violence and his need for recognition from father figures would also have played a central role.

It should be noted that the opposition between actual personality and potential personality should not be viewed in rigid terms, as the two are more intertwined than separated by a clear boundary. In the early scenes of the film, Lucien's potential personality can be seen in his various sadistic behaviors, particularly in the scene where he kills a bird. However, without the war, this personality would have remained largely hidden, even from Lucien himself, unless another crisis situation had brought it to light.

The emergence of potential personality is often linked to a crisis of values, i.e., a situation in which it is difficult to identify ethical



benchmarks and therefore to choose appropriate behaviors, because the external supports of our personality have collapsed. This crisis reveals within us—as in the psychic crystal described by Freud, which, when thrown to the ground, shatters along predetermined lines—what we truly are without knowing it [2]. This is why the period of World War II is so interesting to study and why I chose to set this fiction there.

\*

In the impressive gallery of weak-willed or criminal characters portrayed by *Lacombe Lucien*, there is nevertheless, with the exception of the schoolteacher who makes only a fleeting appearance, a figure of refusal worthy of interest: the tailor Horn.

Unlike his daughter, who becomes Lucien's mistress and eventually runs away with him, Horn embodies silent opposition to the Germans and their accomplices, refusing to show the slightest sympathy for the young man.

But he does even more than that. As the Allied armies advance and he is likely to be saved, he goes to the house where the collaborators live on the pretext of meeting Lucien, clearly intending to be arrested, which is exactly what happens.

The film gives no indication as to what might have led Horn to this

seemingly absurd act, leaving the viewer to imagine. We can assume that by choosing to identify with the victims of the Germans, Horn is expressing his silent opposition to his daughter's decision to live with Lucien.

This behavior, which is absurd by all normal standards, reveals Horn's discreetly heroic personality, in contrast to that of the young man. It also shows the importance of that part of ourselves that is likely to remain forever foreign to us unless the entire value system in which we are immersed and which prevents us from finding ourselves is overturned.

\*

What kind of behavior would I have exhibited? Born like my father in 1922 into this new existence I had chosen for myself, I knew him well enough—he died in 1978—to know that we were similar in many ways and shared many interests, particularly intellectual ones.

So I make the simple assumption that I would have been drawn to the same type of studies that he chose and that I would choose myself later—literature—and I therefore find myself in the same situation as he was in 1940, at a time when the general historical context confronted young people of my generation with the need to make choices.

I myself did hypokhâgne and khâgne about thirty years after him,  
and this family tradition gives some plausibility to

The idea that, if I transport myself back in time, I would also choose to attend preparatory classes at the École Normale Supérieure, the royal road to teaching or research.

Where in the country? The choices are not very numerous, which makes it easier to reconstruct my past. In September 1939, the Ministry of Education decided to close preparatory classes in large cities exposed to German bombing. Those in Paris and Lyon were closed, and their students moved to less exposed cities such as Clermont-Ferrand and Royan.

This was the case for my father, who found himself in Royan in the fall of 1939, where he spent his year of hypokhâgne (preparatory classes for the grandes écoles), and learned in May 1940 that the French army was collapsing. So, for the purposes of this fictional account, I have chosen to settle in Royan myself, in this region that history will soon catch up with in a dramatic way and where many destinies, including mine, are about to be woven together.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ETHICAL CONFLICT

For those who doubt the existence of psychological laws that are difficult to escape and that can be used to ask, with some plausibility, how we would behave in extreme circumstances, Milgram's famous experiment provides a clear refutation.

It is therefore not without reason that it has often been used by all those who have reflected on becoming an executioner or a resistance fighter, as if the lessons learned from this laboratory experiment were essential to understanding what we are likely to become during a violent historical crisis, that is, to understanding our potential personality.

\*

The experiment, which took place between 1960 and 1963, was preceded each time by an announcement in the newspapers in which Yale University said it was recruiting volunteers to participate in an assessment of the links between suffering and memory. Participants were paid \$4.

The aim of the experiment, as presented to the candidates, was to

assess the extent to which suffering or the fear of suffering plays a role in our ability to remember and how human beings are capable of mobilizing all their intellectual energy to escape the threat of physical pain.

The experiment involved three "roles." The "student" had to memorize lists of words and then repeat them, receiving an electric shock for each mistake. The "teacher" dictates the words, questions the student, and sends them a shock when they make a mistake. Finally, the "experimenter" supervises the experiment and ensures that it is carried out correctly.

Each candidate who responds to the advertisement is told that they will first take part in a random draw and that, depending on the result, they will be assigned the role of student or teacher, with the role of experimenter being reserved for the organizers. They are then given a low-voltage electric shock as a test.

The candidate chosen by lot to be the student is then taken to the next room where they are tied to a chair. The candidate designated as the teacher then dictates lists of words that the student must repeat. For each mistake, the teacher sends the student an electric shock of increasing intensity, starting at 15 volts and reaching a maximum of 450 volts.

As the experiment continues, all of the students eventually make mistakes and the teachers are forced to administer increasingly powerful shocks, despite the victims' cries of pain and pleas to stop the exercise. If the teacher hesitates to continue, the experimenter reminds them, using four identical phrases, that they have committed to a scientific experiment and that the university absolves them of all responsibility.

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The scene I have just described is in fact staged, and the candidates recruited through classified ads are being duped.

The first element of the trick is that the random selection is rigged and that everyone who responded to the ad is actually guaranteed to end up in the teacher's place. The second element is that the student, like the experimenter, is an actor and does not receive any electric shocks. Their role is limited to shouting convincingly in pain from the next room.

The main element of the trick is the purpose of the experiment, which is carefully concealed from the participants. The aim is not to evaluate the links between memory and pain, but to test submission to authority, or, if you prefer, the ability of human beings to obey absurd or even criminal orders without protest.

It is indeed absurd and criminal—the electric shocks were supposedly sent at the end of the experiment were dangerous—sending electric shocks to someone on the grounds that they couldn't remember a list of words. This leads us to wonder what percentage of participants agreed to obey such senseless instructions without question.

\*

Before giving Milgram's figures, it is important to clarify the conditions under which the participants found themselves, conditions that may explain why they obeyed the orders they were given so readily. All these conditions are based on the idea of authority, and the different variations of the experiment aim to study how this proves to



be a determining factor in the decision-making process.

The first contextual element to bear in mind is that the experiment took place at a university, one of the most prestigious in the United States, Yale, which is bound to impress the participants. They were made to feel even more at ease by the fact that the experiment was supervised by an actor in a white coat who presented himself as a scientist.

Another major factor determining participants' attitudes is the type of instruction used by the experimenter when he senses their resolve weakening. These instructions—four in total and always identical—aim to relieve them of all responsibility, with the fake supervisor assuring them that they will not suffer any consequences for their actions and that they can therefore continue torturing in peace:

Instruction 1: Please continue, *or* I beg you to continue. Instruction 2: The experiment requires that you continue.

Instruction 3: It is absolutely essential that you continue.

Instruction 4: You have no choice, you must continue [\[3\]](#).

This game of increasing pressure, which aims to impress the participants, tends to reinforce the weight of the general context in which they are placed, and it is only after four refusals to obey the instructions, and therefore when it is certain that the test subject is determined not to continue, that the actor disguised as an academic ends the experiment.

When asked how many participants had the good sense to realize, right from the start of the experiment, that they had no reason, even for scientific purposes, to send electric shocks to people they didn't even know, the answer is that there were none, and that 100% of participants, out of a representative sample of more than 600 people, agreed without hesitation to lower the levers:

The reader's first reaction may be to be surprised that an individual in full possession of their faculties would consent to administer an electric shock, however slight, to a third party. Wouldn't they immediately have the reflex to refuse and walk away? The fact is that none of the participants did [4].

But another figure is just as frightening. Even as the so-called "students" in the next room scream and beg louder and louder for the experiment to be stopped, 60% of the "teachers" [5] continue to administer electric shocks until the end:

What is surprising is how far an ordinary individual can go in submitting to the experimenter's orders. In fact, the results of the experiment are both unexpected and disturbing. Even taking into account the fact that many subjects experience considerable stress and that some protest to the experimenter, the fact remains that a significant proportion of them continue to the highest shock level of the stimulator [6].

Thus, reading these results, Milgram seems to have demonstrated that we all harbor within ourselves the potential personality of a torturer, waiting to emerge as soon as historical circumstances allow and take hold of us.

As worrying as the results of this experiment may be, they should be interpreted with caution. They are first and foremost contradicted by historical reality. While 100% of participants agreed to send electric shocks, this was by no means the case in real-life situations such as those I will examine in this book, where the risks associated with refusing to obey criminals

much more serious consequences.

The circumstances are completely different, and on reflection, there is little reason to be scandalized by the fact that so many participants allowed themselves to be caught in the trap. To consider them all as potential executioners is indeed a misinterpretation, even if the question arises for those who went all the way. This would be to overlook an essential point, namely that, throughout the first part of the experiment, both parties were consenting.

Even if administering electric shocks is clearly an act of violence, it is wrong to equate it with a form of torture as long as the person receiving the shocks accepts the principle behind it. A more appropriate comparison than torture would be violent sports such as boxing. I may find it senseless to participate in an activity that involves hurting another person, but it is difficult to consider it torture as long as both participants have freely given their consent.

The real threshold to consider in Milgram's experiment is therefore not the moment when participants deliver the first shock, nor when they begin to deliver shocks that are labeled as dangerous. It is the precise moment when the actor playing the student declares that he refuses to continue the experiment. This moment is the real turning point between a silly game and torture.

However, it is clear that a number of participants placed in the position of teachers refuse to continue the experiment once the student

has expressed his decision to stop, implicitly considering that they were both bound by a tacit contract, which has now been broken.

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This refusal to continue is particularly illustrated by one of the most remarkable participants, a theology professor who committed himself to the experiment without apparent scruples but refused to go any further once his partner withdrew his consent. He expressed his opposition at 150 volts. The experimenter then resorts to the four classic formulas to convince him that the experiment must continue, even adding some of his own

OWN:

The experimenter: It is absolutely necessary that the experiment continue.

Subject: I understand your point of view, but I do not accept that the experiment should be placed above this person's life.

The experimenter: There is no danger of permanent injury.

The subject: You said it! If this man doesn't want to continue, I will obey him.

The experimenter: You have no choice, sir, you must continue.

The subject: If we were in Russia under , maybe, but this is America. (The experiment is over.) [7]

It is clear from the theology professor's comments that the student's opinion is decisive and that the professor bases his own opinion on it:

The subject (spontaneously): You have surely thought about the ethics of your research. (*At the height of agitation.*) Here is a man who tells you he doesn't want to continue, and you think the experiment is more important than his personal opinion? Have you examined him? Do you know what physical condition he is in? (*With a quiver in his voice.*) Suppose he has a weak heart?

The experimenter: We know our equipment well, sir.

The subject: But you don't know this man... He's very dangerous. (*In a strangled, trembling voice*) What about the fear he feels [8]?

At the same time as he withdraws from the experiment, having failed to obtain his partner's consent, the theology professor expresses his concern for the other man's body and shows that, from his perspective, where only subjects exist in their singularity, no mechanical obedience, and therefore no submission, is acceptable.

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However questionable the conditions of its organization and its

conclusions may be, Milgram's experiment is rich in lessons, the main one being that it is impossible to ignore the existence of psychological laws that impose themselves on us, some of which are draconian. Whatever trap the participants fell into, the fact remains that all of them agreed to deliver electric shocks.

"When you're sitting comfortably in your chair," Milgram notes, "it's easy to play [judge](#) ." Neither readers nor I can therefore entertain any illusions about what would have happened.

our attitude if we had been subjected to this experiment. Like all of the participants at the time and all of those who have participated since [10], we would have, with varying degrees of reluctance, lowered the levers presented to us. And there is even a significant risk that we would have crossed the line between game and torture where the theology professor stopped.

Among these laws, Milgram identifies one that gives his essay its name, *obedience to authority*, which could be described as the difficulty of saying no:

It is this extreme propensity of adults to submit un ly to the orders of authority that constitutes the major finding of our study [11].

The different variations of Milgram's experiment, which attempted to understand as precisely as possible the mechanisms of this submission, show how it is more successful when authority gives the impression of being unquestionable and less successful when it gives the impression of being weakened.

Thus, participants easily free themselves from the constraint of delivering electric shocks if there are two experimenters and if the students perceive a disagreement between them, which weakens the authority's influence ( ) [12]. Similarly, they feel more capable of showing disobedience if they are not isolated but belong to a group that already includes rebels [13].



Milgram's experiment also allows me to identify a concept that will be central to this essay, namely that of *ethical conflict*. Far from being unhesitating, many participants are torn between the demands imposed on them or which they believe to be necessary and what they feel, more or less obscurely, to be contrary to morality. The experimenter's interventions are designed to help them resolve this conflict, or at least to resolve it in favor of continuing the experiment:

A person comes to a psychology laboratory where they are asked to perform a series of actions that gradually come into conflict with their conscience. The question is to what precise extent they will follow the experimenter's instructions before refusing to perform the prescribed actions [\[14\]](#).

By focusing his interpretation of the experiment on the notion of internal conflict, Milgram, it could be said, displays a certain optimism. He tends to consider that all subjects subjected to the experiment are torn between the orders they receive and their conscience. This is indeed the best-case scenario—and many participants clearly express their inner conflict—but it should be noted that this conflict may not always exist.

It is important to note that ethical conflict should not be confused with *psychological conflict*, in the Freudian sense of the term. It is true that in both cases, the subject is torn between opposing forces. It is

also true that, in psychological conflict, the superego, which represents morality and in particular parental morality, can embody

the conscience to which Milgram refers. However, many psychological conflicts do not involve morality. While obviously having a psychological dimension, ethical conflict differs in that it pits forces that urge the subject to respect their moral rules against other forces that urge them to transgress them. Or, to put it another way, they are torn between the need to obey and their desire to oppose orders that their conscience condemns.

In the examples given here, when there is conflict, psychological conflict and ethical conflict are closely intertwined. But the subjects studied by Milgram are not divided between the id and the

superego, even if some may derive pleasure from inflicting suffering. Rather, they are divided between the superego and the superego, that is, between two value systems—obedience to authority and respect for human beings—that they are unable to reconcile.

Despite this conflict and the suffering it causes, it is the sense of doing their duty that will prevail in the majority of subjects over all other considerations:

During the post-experiment interview, when we asked the subjects why they had continued, we invariably got this standard response: "I wouldn't have done that on my own. I just did what I was told to do." Unable to rebel against the authority of the experimenter, they shifted all responsibility onto him. It is always the old refrain of "doing one's duty" that

was repeatedly used as a defense argument during the Nuremberg trials [15].

For the feeling of doing one's duty to prevail at the end of the conflict, or, if you prefer, to put an end to the conflict, it must be assumed that the subject, forced to commit acts he disapproves of and anxious not to break with his ethics, has transformed into a value, and has therefore undertaken to moralize, what the experimenter asked him to do:

Although, under these conditions, an individual commits acts that appear to violate the criteria of his conscience, it would be wrong to conclude that his moral sense has disappeared: the truth is that he has radically changed his objective. The individual no longer makes value judgments about his actions. What concerns him now is to prove

himself worthy of what the authority expects of him [16].

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In Milgram's view, the human propensity to obey played a decisive

## role in the implementation of the Final Solution during World War II:

It has been established beyond doubt that, between 1933 and 1945, millions of innocent people were systematically murdered on orders from above. With an efficiency comparable to that of a factory producing spare parts, gas chambers were built, death camps were maintained, and daily quotas of corpses were supplied. Such inhumane policies may have been conceived by a single mind, but they would never have been implemented on such a scale if there had not been so many people willing to carry them out without question [17].

The value of Milgram's work is not only to remind us how easy it is to become a criminal, but also to show that this transformation sometimes occurs simply by obeying orders without thinking, especially when those orders are given by a moral authority and therefore seem obvious, as has been the case at various times in history. There is more than one point of similarity between Milgram's fictional academic in a white coat, who issues absurd orders while assuring the test subjects that he takes full responsibility for the experiment, and the figure of Marshal Pétain, whom I listened to on the radio on June 17, 1940, from Royan. He too embodied true moral authority and declared that he would take responsibility for what was happening, and it is not surprising that so many French people chose to obey him without asking any questions.

We can assume that some of those who listened to this speech found themselves in this ethical conflict and wondered what they

should do. It is reassuring, in any case, that in such a situation, and

contrary to a hasty reading of the results of Milgram's experiment, a significant number of them decided, like the

theology professor, to disobey. Their merit must be measured against the difficulty of disobeying orders given by an authority considered legitimate, whose prestige at the time was immense.

Even if I have not heard myself this speech, his

The immediate repercussions are such—since it leads to the cessation of fighting—that it is the first decisive factor I am confronted with as a student in preparatory classes. The man who leads my country has asked the French army to cease hostilities. I can certainly try to buy a little more time, but it is clear that I am at a crossroads in my personal history and that I will have to make a decision quickly.

## CHAPTER III

### THE FORK IN THE ROAD

There is something unbearable about the photograph accompanying the French paperback edition of Christopher Browning's book, *Ordinary Men*, taken during the Christmas celebrations of 1940. A dozen members of the 101st Reserve Battalion of the German police are shown facing the camera, a glass or bottle in their hands, looking cheerfully at the lens.

Nothing in the faces of these young, handsome, smiling men, who appear eminently likeable, gives any hint of what they will become a year and a half later in the village of Jozefow, Poland. Nor of what they will continue to be in the months following that first massacre – revealing their true potential – namely, mass murderers.

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While Milgram establishes an explicit link between his experiment and the Holocaust, and even refers to Eichmann, he does not examine in detail the circumstances that led the exterminators to obey criminal orders without protest.

Hence the interest of Browning's book, which refers to Milgram and

complements it nicely by analyzing in detail the behavior of a German police battalion during the Holocaust. As the title suggests, the point of his approach is to reflect on the behavior of ordinary people faced with an extreme situation, not that of criminal lunatics or rabid anti-Semites.

To understand what this German police battalion was and what it faced, we need to look back at the circumstances that plunged it into horror and, as Browning himself does, recall what *the Ordnungspolizei*, to which it belonged, was. This was not a military unit, but a police force that numbered 131,000 men at the start of the war. It was not merged into the army, but will remain at its disposal when Germany's military successes make it necessary to increase the occupation forces [18].

However, as a police unit, the 101st Battalion was under dual command: on the one hand, it was under the authority of the Main Office in Berlin, where its leadership was based, and on the other hand, it was under the authority of the SS and its supreme leader Himmler, who could use these troops as he saw fit to carry out the final solution [19].

It was therefore within the framework of *the Ordnungspolizei* that the 101st Battalion was called upon to intervene in Poland. Its commander was Wilhelm Trapp, a 53-year-old career policeman. Although he had joined the Nazi Party in 1932, he had never belonged to the SS [20]. The officers and other members of the commando, although they included a large number of party members, were from

fairly poor backgrounds and had probably been members of trade unions or left-wing [movements](#) [21]. Like Trapp, they did not fit the profile of mass murderers.

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It was probably on July 11, 1942, that Major Trapp learned from his superiors of the mission that had just been entrusted to his battalion: the roundup of 1,800 Jews from the village of Jozefow. The orders he received were clear: men of working age were to be taken to camps, while women, children, and the elderly were to be shot on the spot.

Trapp informed his subordinates of the mission entrusted to the battalion. One of them, Lieutenant Heinz Buchmann, expressed his disagreement:

Aware of the impending massacre, Buchmann refused to take part; in his dual capacity as a Hamburg businessman and reserve lieutenant, he explained to Hagen that "he would not under any circumstances take part in an action of this kind, in which defenseless women and children would be put to death." He therefore requested another assignment, which Hagen granted him: Lieutenant Buchmann commanded the escort of the

male "labor Jews" who would be selected and taken to Lublin [22].

Unlike their superiors, the men in the ranks did not know the mission they were about to carry out and only found out when they arrived in Jozefow, where Trapp explained what he expected of them. But he accompanied his explanations with an surprising proposal

surprising:

Arranged in a semicircle, the men listen to their commander's speech. Trapp explains the battalion's bloody mission, after which he makes them an extraordinary offer: if any of the



older men feel unable to participate, they may leave the ranks [23].

This proposal was unexpected in the context of the German army, but it had an immediate effect:

A few moments pass, then a policeman from the 3rd company, Otto-Julius Schimke, steps forward. Captain Hoffmann becomes angry. Hoffmann [...] is furious that one of his men was the first to break ranks. He showers Schimke with insults, but Trapp cuts him off. With the commander clearly taking the recalcitrant man under his wing, some ten or twelve men follow their comrade. They are ordered to hand over their weapons and await the

commander's instructions [24].

This proposal was not the only one made to the men of the 101st Battalion not to participate in the massacres. On other occasions during the same day, they were given the opportunity to refrain from killing. A little later, after the nature of the task entrusted to them had been explained and they had been shown how to carry it out, some asked for other assignments or managed to stay away by hiding or climbing into a truck that was leaving to fetch Jews from another village [25].

Later still, once the massacre had begun, some men came to their superiors to explain that they were incapable of killing women and children, and were then given other tasks [26]. These men therefore had several opportunities throughout the day not to participate in the killings, and none of them, it seems, suffered any consequences, as indicated by the testimony of one of the battalion members:

Those who did not want to kill human beings with their own hands, or were incapable of doing so, could easily escape. There was no strict control whatsoever. I myself stayed with the trucks when they arrived and busied myself at the unloading point. At least, I pretended to. I couldn't prevent some of my comrades from noticing that I wasn't going to the site to shoot the victims. They showered me with insults such as "bastard" and "wimp" to show me how much they despised me. But I did not suffer any consequences from my actions. I must say here that I was not the only one who refrained from participating in the executions

[27].

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The Jozefow massacre was the first carried out by the 101st Battalion. But its participation in the Holocaust was not limited to these initial killings. On the contrary, these men found themselves increasingly trained to kill, to the point where, over time, they became perfect executioners

The massacre at Jozefow was followed on August 17 by the massacre at Lomazy. This time, the men of the 101st Battalion were not given the opportunity to refuse and carried out their task with less difficulty than the first time. First of all, most of them were only responsible for rounding up and guarding the Jews, with the actual executions being carried out by a special commando unit of killers. Furthermore, unlike what had happened in Jozefow, the men of the battalion were not assigned to specific individuals to kill, so no bonds were formed between executioner and victim. In addition, they had begun to harden:

Having already killed once mitigated the trauma of the second time. As with so many other things, one could get used to killing [29].

Finally, the last major difference that Browning emphasizes is that the men of the 101st Battalion were not faced with an explicit choice, and since no other option was offered to them [30], they " n t à vivre avec le sentiment que ce qu'ils ont fait pouvait être évité [31]" (did not have to live with the feeling that what they did could have been avoided).

But the involvement of the men of the 101st Battalion in the Holocaust did not end there. The day after the Lomazy massacre, they were

ordered to participate in the deportation to Treblinka of Jews from two ghettos, Parczew and Miedzyrzec, the latter having been emptied of its inhabitants in particularly horrific [conditions](#) [32].

And that's not all. At the end of September, police officers from the same battalion took part in the killing of the inhabitants of the village of Serokomla, then, in retaliation for the death of a German sergeant, in the execution of 200 people, inhabitants of the town of Talcyn and the Kock [ghetto](#) [33].

They were also involved in the deportation of 2,000 Jews from Radzyn, then in other deportations from Miedzyrzec in October, and finally in the deportation of 3,000 to 4,000 Jews from Lukow in early [November](#) [34]. And part of the 101st battalion that had escaped the massacres until then aux , la 3rd est chargée de la deportation of 1,500 to 2,000 Jews from the Konskowola [ghetto](#) [35]. In mid-November 1942, these men took part in the killing of 6,500 Polish Jews and the deportation of 42,000 others to Treblinka [36].

And it wasn't over yet. They went on to participate in the extermination of Jews from the Lublin region who had escaped the previous massacres and were wandering in the countryside or the [forest](#) [37]. And when the last ghettos in the region were decimated during the "harvest festival," they took an active part in the massacres at Majdanek and Poniatowa, which left more than 30,500 dead [38].

In total, it can be estimated that these men, who had no

predisposition to become serial killers and some of whom were initially reluctant to commit murder, ultimately participated in the killing of 83,000 people [39].

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In the episode involving the 101st Battalion and the Jozefow massacre, we find some of the elements analyzed above, including the question of ethical conflict. While some members of the battalion do not question their actions, a significant number find it extremely difficult to obey orders or are forced to stop.

Two factors are inextricably linked here. The first is the physical impossibility of carrying out the orders. For a number of these men, who were not used to killing, the sight of the massacres was unbearable:

When they arrive at the barracks in Bilgoraj, the men are depressed, troubled, furious, and bitter. They eat little but drink heavily. There is no shortage of alcohol, and many of the policemen are dead drunk. Commander Trapp talks to his men, trying to console them and strengthen their resolve, once again reminding them of the responsibility of the authorities. But neither the drink nor Trapp's efforts can wash away the shame and horror that haunt the barracks [40].

The second is a conflict of values, which is characteristic of ethical conflict. These men feel that by killing innocent human beings, especially children, on a massive scale, they are violating an inner law. But they have received orders, and refusing to obey them would place them in a position of transgression against their "conscience."

As in Milgram's experiment, the ethical conflict here is characterized by a double injunction from the superego, with the two injunctions being contradictory. These men must obey both the orders given by the military authority and the demands of their moral sense, which, even if they are not committed Christians, can only lead them to refuse to become killers.

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Even though they couldn't stand killing and suffered from being in conflict with themselves, how could the men of the 101st Battalion behave like that? This is the question addressed in Browning's book, a question that is all the more interesting given that, unlike other major Nazi criminals, they "were not made of the stuff from which future mass murderers are carved."

[41].

It is obviously impossible to answer such a question simply, and Browning cites several factors that may have led them to this point. The first is *fear of punishment*. These men allegedly agreed to commit abominable crimes for fear of punishment. In other words, and this is the defense they rallied behind after the war, they had no choice:

But this type of explanation presents a serious difficulty. Quite simply, in forty-five years and hundreds of trials, not a single lawyer or defendant was able to produce a single case in which the refusal to kill unarmed civilians led to the terrible punishment that was supposed to be meted out to those who refused to obey orders. Occasional punishments or reprimands were never commensurate with the gravity of the crimes these men were required to commit

[42].

Contrary to the image one might have of discipline in the German army, refusal to participate in mass murder was not punishable by death. It should be added that, in the case of the first massacre, that of Jozefow, the men of the 101st Battalion were explicitly offered the option of abstaining. Fear of reprisals, while it may have played a role, cannot therefore fully explain their attitude.

As a reader of Milgram, Browning therefore proposes as a second hypothesis *submission to authority* as defined by Milgram in his book. This proposal is all the more

well-founded given that Milgram himself drew a comparison between the situation in which the subjects of his experiment found themselves and that of the Germans facing the Holocaust:

Was the Jozefow massacre a kind of radical Milgram experiment, which took place in a forest in Poland, with real killers and real victims, rather than in a social psychology

laboratory, with "naive" subjects and actors/victims [\[43\]](#)?

But Browning notes that the parallel, tempting as it may be, does not really work. It would be difficult to find a strong authoritarian figure among the battalion's leaders, the main one even suggesting that his men withdraw from the operation if they did not feel capable of carrying it out. If most of the police officers obeyed the murderous orders without complaint, it was because another form of pressure was exerted on them.

Browning then turns his attention to an element that did not feature in Milgram's experiment – except in the form of faith in the values of science and in the people who embody them – namely *the ideology* in which these men were steeped. Although they were not particularly anti-Semitic, they lived in an environment where everything led them to consider Jews as inferior beings:

One thing is clear: the men's concern for their image in the eyes of their comrades was not likely to be hampered by a sense of belonging to the same humanity as their victims. For that feeling did not exist. Jews stood outside the sphere of human obligation and

responsibility [\[44\]](#).

But Browning notes that this ideology alone does not explain the behavior of these men. Having carefully studied all the propaganda documents available to them, he concludes that while these documents



cultivated their anti-Semitism, they could not have played a major role in turning them into criminals:

Influenced, conditioned, imbued with their own racial superiority and convinced of the inferiority and radical otherness of the Jews, many of them— t among them—were undoubtedly ready to kill Jews, but they were certainly not prepared to do so [\[45\]](#).

\*

Browning then comes to a factor that he believes played a major role in the transformation of these ordinary men into monsters:

Breaking ranks, stepping forward, behaving nonconformistically was simply beyond their strength. They found it easier to shoot.

Why? First and foremost because breaking ranks meant leaving the "dirty work" to their comrades. Since the battalion had to fire even if the individual did not, refusing to shoot was tantamount to shirking a painful collective obligation. It was an antisocial act towards one's own comrades. Those who did not shoot risked isolation, rejection, and ostracism—a very uncomfortable prospect in a tightly knit unit stationed abroad as a page within a hostile population. Where else could they find support and human contact?

The desire to imitate others, for fear of being noticed—that is, of meeting their disapproving gaze when leaving the group—could thus be enough to transform normal people into mass criminals. Similar to Milgram's principle, Browning's explanation differs, however, by emphasizing what he calls *group conformity*.

This group conformity had already been highlighted in an experiment prior to Milgram's, Solomon Asch's [experiment \[47\]](#). This experiment showed the extreme difficulty of thinking differently within an apparently cohesive group, even when everything pointed to accepting this difference.

Thus, the effort required to stand out, especially in a context of general disruption of values where it becomes difficult to be sure of what is right, can prove greater than the certainty, dictated by conscience, of participating in criminal activities.

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The value of Browning's book lies not only in its detailed study of psychological conflict, but also in its introduction of what I would call

a *bifurcation*.

While the subjects of Milgram's experiment are never explicitly confronted with a choice—the entire experiment is designed to make its continuation seem natural ("You must continue")—the men of the 101st Battalion are faced with such a choice, as they are clearly told that they have the right to refuse to participate in the massacre. And while they can argue that they were taken by surprise when the first proposal was made to them, they are given several other opportunities to abstain throughout the day, and the spectacle

of those who refuse is an encouragement to ask questions and therefore amounts to the opening of a choice.

The bifurcation is même visuellement représentable dans  
la

The first scene described by Browning, that of Trapp's speech, in which those who refuse to participate in the first massacre are asked by him to step forward from the ranks to mark their distance, a gesture that leads to a material transposition of the bifurcation [48].

Like the situation in which these men found themselves, each life is thus a succession of bifurcations, more or less clearly visible, which draw before us a multitude of virtual itineraries leading to parallel existences that we will never know, where we would have had other experiences, made other encounters, loved or hated other people. And where other potential personalities that we carry within us and that remain forever hidden might have revealed themselves.

Can we also talk about a fork in the road for young French people like me, faced with total disaster in the spring of 1940? The image doesn't seem wrong for all those who, after hearing the speech on June 17, heard the one on June 18, which offered another path and forced them to make a choice. But, according to the general consensus of historians, few listened to General de Gaulle's speech and therefore found themselves faced with such a clearly formulated dilemma.

However, even if the fork in the road was not as clear to the French

people who did not hear both speeches, it still presented itself to them in the weeks that followed, both because a version of General de Gaulle's speech was distributed on posters and because the overall attitude of the new government could only lead those who did not approve of it to consider alternative paths.

So, as I traveled from city to city with my friends (the preparatory class in Royan was transferred to Bayonne for ten days in June, then to Pau in July when the Germans reached the French coast), avoid the choice before me and pretend that nothing was happening, putting off the moment of decision indefinitely.

In such a situation, I see no other option than to join the French forces that remain free and attempt to leave the country. To do so, I need to find a boat that will take me away.

After several unsuccessful attempts in Atlantic ports, I finally decided to head for Spain, determined, whatever happened, not to give up and to continue fighting.

# INTERNAL CONSTRAINTS

# CHAPTER ONE

## IDEOLOGICAL DISAGREEMENT

In June 1940, when I made the decision to head for Spain, I was in southwestern France, finishing my preparatory studies for the agrégation. This is quite plausible, since my father had come there to continue his studies, which I would undoubtedly have followed had I been born at that time, and since it was one of the places where preparatory classes were transferred after the government decided to close them in the big cities.

The choice of this region as a fictional place to live is also due to the fact that it is a major geographical and historical crossroads for young people of my generation, since, as a land of welcome for many refugees fleeing the fighting, it temporarily hosted the new government while offering a starting point for French people wishing to continue the struggle abroad.

It is therefore no coincidence that several of the major historical figures whose journeys I have decided to follow here find themselves in this region at the moment when their destinies are being shaped. It is therefore logical that I chose this major crossroads as the setting in which to place my character-delegate and bring him to life for a time, in an experimental way.



So, in the circumstances in which I found myself in June 1940, what reasons could lead an eighteen-year-old young man like me to take a stand one way or the other, rather than wait quietly for the war to end? And, in particular, what could lead me to oppose the regime that was gradually being established before my very eyes?

The first reason, which seems obvious but whose importance should not be underestimated, was ideological disagreement with the government. While Marshal Pétain's desire, expressed in his speech on

June 17, to sign an armistice with the Germans in order to protect the country seemed legitimate to me, it seemed even more so given that the French state established on July 10 suited me in its broad outlines. June 17 to sign the armistice with the Germans to protect the country seemed legitimate to me, and even more so if the French state established

on July 10 suited me in its broad outlines, there was little chance of a fork

in the road appearing in my mind. I would do what many French people

did at the time in terms of political engagement, namely nothing in particular.

And the same applies if, while not entirely in agreement with what is happening and with the decisions being taken by the government, my disagreement does not reach such a level that I feel compelled to

take action, or at least inclined to ask myself the question that

determines all others: what can and should I do in such circumstances?

Ideological disagreement is the necessary condition for any act of resistance, the intellectual horizon against which it stands out as dissent. The first question to be resolved, which determines all the others, is therefore how I view the regime that came to power after the military debacle of spring 1940.

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That ideological disagreement is an essential condition for resistance is clearly evident in the extraordinary autobiography of Daniel Cordier, who lived very close to where I was at the time, and whom I may have crossed paths with without knowing it during one of my trips to the region.

Born in Bordeaux in August 1920, Cordier was raised in a Maurrassian family and was a staunch supporter of Maurras's main ideas, including his hatred of the Republic:

Hatred of the Republic was justified by the harmfulness of human rights, which were seen as the source of corrupt individualism. According to Maurras, "democratic anarchy" had placed France at the mercy of four "confederate" powers: Protestants, Jews, foreigners, and Freemasons. While bringing about the downfall of France, they encouraged corruption and fostered disorder, paving the way for the ruin of the homeland. They had to be eradicated. In *contrast*, the monarchy was the absolute remedy—only the king could restore

France's honor, cultural splendor, natural order, and place in the world as the first [among equals](#).

Cordier's opposition to parliamentarianism and human rights was

obviously accompanied, as in the entire far-right tradition of the time,  
by strong anti-Semitism:

As a child, even before I had opened a history book, I was convinced of the crimes and inherent treachery of the Jews, a perverse people whose ambition was to rule the world through money. Manipulated by Satan, they were guilty of the death of Christ and were cursed for it. Later, I discovered that this event was "proven" in my catechism and justified

by the lessons of my Dominican teachers [\[50\]](#).

An avid reader of Maurras' works, Cordier founded a Charles Maurras circle in Bordeaux in 1936, bringing together high school and college students from the department to sell *L'Action française*, organize conferences, and participate in royalist demonstrations. He was therefore predisposed to political engagement from a very young age.

But an ideological shift occurred in his intellectual life at that time with the reading of Thierry Maulnier, who did not refer to the king:

Without admitting it, my admiration for Franco, Salazar, and Mussolini (the trinity of my family) found its place there. Were not the order and nationalism advocated by Maurras being fulfilled in fascism? It was younger, more dynamic, and better suited to my temperament. However, I continued to follow the Camelots du Roi, shouting "Long live the king!" with the

energy of [blind devotion](#).

In short, everything predisposed Cordier, in terms of political thought, to support Marshal Pétain's government. Fate, however, decided otherwise.

At the time of defeat, Cordier was in the south-west near Pau, in Bescat. He had taken refuge there after unsuccessfully attempting, due to his age, to enlist in the army. And it was there that he heard Marshal Pétain's call to cease fighting:

So is the war over, irretrievably lost? [...] Before any reflection, one thing is certain: God has not abandoned France; it is Pétain who has betrayed it. Under the guise of his glory, he has deceived everyone, including Maurras. The myth of the vanquished ur of Verdun, collapses: he is too old. He throws in the towel when victory is within reach [\[52\]](#).

The shock was all the greater for Cordier because he had campaigned in the region, following Maurras' repeated requests that Pétain be given full powers, and had enthusiastically welcomed his arrival in government. He therefore found himself betrayed by the very man in whom he had placed all his hopes.

Not giving up, Cordier, with the help of his family—in particular de his father-in-law – who le supports completely, is using the royalist networks he has built up to mobilize young people around him, explaining to them that it is essential to continue the fight by relying on the forces and territories of the French Empire.

While the first volunteers numbered around a hundred, ultimately sixteen comrades—most of them eighteen years old, Cordier himself being nineteen—who embarked with him in Bayonne on June 21, 1940, on the *Léopold II* bound for North Africa.

Shortly after leaving France, Cordier learned that the captain of the ship had changed his mind and was heading for England. Upon arriving at this unexpected destination, he enlisted in the French Foreign Legion led by de Gaulle, out of loyalty to Maurras, whom he knew de Gaulle to be a devoted reader. These were the reasons he gave to the French consul, who had rallied to Pétain and was urging young Frenchmen to return to their homeland:

Having never seen a consul in the flesh, I am not at all impressed and become provocative: "I don't believe you. All the patriots are in London. I'm sure Maurras and the men of Action Française have gone before us." Stunned, he looks at me as if I were crazy: "Maurras is a good Frenchman. He supports with his authority the policy of Marshal Pétain, which is none other than that of France. De Gaulle is no longer a gener ; he will be court-martialed for desertion. [...]"

Convinced that these were nothing but lies, I turned my back on him and walked away without replying [53].

It took Cordier a long time—a year and a half—to realize that he had been wrong in his analysis and that Maurras had indeed joined Pétain. He symbolically broke with him by writing him an imaginary letter on December 2, 1941:

When the armistice was signed, was there not a single plane left? Were all our ships sunk? Was our ammunition exhausted? Were our cities razed to the ground? Were all French people dead with weapons in their hands? No. And you dare to say that we were defeated. Say rather that we were betrayed. That you betrayed us [54].

Having trained as a radio operator and saboteur, Cordier was finally parachuted into occupied France in July 1942, two years after his arrival in England. He was assigned to become the private secretary of Georges Bidault, but he was quickly recruited by a certain Rex, whose identity he did not know, and became his secretary and radio operator until Rex's arrest in June.

of Georges Bidault, but he was quickly recruited by a certain Rex, whose identity he did not know, and became his secretary and radio operator until Rex's arrest in June 1943.

Cordier's autobiography devotes considerable space to the mysterious figure of this man who, in the name of de Gaulle, attempted to unite the resistance movements and disappeared from his life after being arrested, but not before introducing him to modern art, to which the young man devoted himself after the Liberation. It was not until October 1944 that he learned the name of the man he had seen every day:

Until the Liberation, I did not know Rex's real name, which no one had ever mentioned in my presence. When I returned to France in early October 1944, I telephoned Pierre Meunier (Morlaix). He suggested that we meet for lunch with Robert Chambeiron (Champion). When they arrived at the meeting place, they were accompanied by an unknown woman, whom they introduced to me. [...] Curious about this unknown presence, I asked my comrade:

"Who is this lady?

— She's Jean's sister.

— But who is Jean?"

Surprised by my question, Meunier stopped and looked at me: "Come on, he was your boss, Jean Moulin."

I thus discovered in the most unexpected way the name of the man I had believed to be famous. I had imagined him occupying the highest positions in politics, diplomacy, or perhaps painting. Meunier's reply, confirmed his status: he was a complete stranger. My

disappointment was equal to my hope, which had been immense [\[55\]](#).

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So it was out of loyalty to Maurras that Daniel Cordier joined de Gaulle and became Jean Moulin's secretary. The paradoxical

originality of his career, which is by no means exceptional in a period of history when values are in crisis, might dissuade me from pursuing my research further, given the random nature of any career path and the pretentiousness of attempting to reconstruct it after the event. However, this should not obscure the fact that this destiny follows a logic, just like that of Malle and Modiano's hero, certain dominant themes of which can be identified in hindsight.

The unlikely journey of Jean Moulin's secretary should not obscure the fact that he was motivated by nationalist convictions. In fact, on closer inspection, even if one

one might feel that he did not belong in the camp where one would have expected him to be, it was not he who changed, but Maurras.

The quelques jours qui séparent le discours de Pétain

de

boarding the *Léopold II* show how Cordier finds himself at one of those major crossroads in our lives where our destiny is decided. This is spatially represented by his decision to leave for Bayonne, then to leave France, when most of his comrades choose to stay in Pau.

This split is even more clearly illustrated in a scene with one of his friends, Frédéric, who hesitates for a moment before deciding not to follow him. Frédéric's hesitation is not ideological. He is likely to share his friend's political views. However, he has just gotten engaged and does not want to leave his fiancée. Furthermore, he believes that Hitler has won and does not want to make a fool of himself:

"Do you even know where you're going?" I'm more confident: "To join the French army in the empire." I speak forcefully, trying to regain the upper hand. "Who says the empire will continue the war? Peace also applies to the colonies. The length of the crossing means you'll arrive there after the signing of the armistice. You'll look good. As for me, I've always

been afraid of looking ridiculous [56]."

Or further on:

He hesitates. Have I convinced him? As we continue walking, he recovers: "But it's not for me. We only have one life. How long can this war last? Months, years? There's Caroline, my studies: I'm preparing for Polytechnique. I don't want to sacrifice my family or my career on a whim. I'm not afraid of death, but I don't want to miss out on my life. Even if the empire and

England persist, they will be defeated. Hitler is invincible now [57]."

Cordier's friend's argument is respectable. It was probably shared by many young French people in 1940, who believed that the Germans had won the war. Committed to continuing my studies and eager to



prepare for the École Normale Supérieure, I cannot say with certainty that I am immune to such sentiments.

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At this point in my book, it is impossible for me to avoid the question any longer and not ask myself, before returning in more detail to my journey, what I thought in

1940, when, at the age of eighteen, I found myself studying in the south-west of France.

The first question is what I mean by "I" when I reflect on the decisions I made at the time. If the "I" I construct is too close to who I am today, the question is meaningless. Transporting myself back in time means abandoning a number of intellectual and cultural traits that are part of who I am today. It also means finding a middle ground between myself and the different person I would have been if, having lost all ties to the present, I were the pure product of the circumstances of another era.

The character-delegate I sent in the past is therefore necessarily a composite creature, to whom I attribute the main traits that are mine today while removing at least two essential elements of my intellectual personality, without which this individual uchronia experience would have little meaning.

The first element to be removed is knowledge of history. If I know from 1940 that the Allies will win the war, I will be more naturally inclined to engage in resistance than if I think the opposite. Cordier's friend's reasoning and his resulting abstention are based in part on his conviction that Hitler has won and that getting involved will be pointless. His attitude might be different if he had the right information about the future.

The second element I must set aside is all of my current intellectual assumptions.

If I transport myself back in time as I am today, the ideological dimension of the choice facing the French people at that time will disappear completely, particularly their attitude toward the form of government and anti-Semitism. For an intellectual today, democracy is a given and anti-Semitism is a pathology. But this was not at all the case at the time, when renowned intellectuals could criticize the former and defend the latter.

It is therefore this delegation, distant from me historically and ideologically, but closer in my view to my potential personality, that must be confronted in my imagination with the ethical conflict experienced by the young people of the previous generation. And it is this that I must try to understand if I want to grasp the reasons that guided my choice at the time.

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At this stage, I can put forward two hypotheses about the behavior in 1940 of this delegate who bears my name. The first question I must ask myself is whether I disagree with the regime in power. At the risk of sounding overly confident, I cannot imagine that I would have had the slightest sympathy for the Vichy regime.

It is obviously easy to hold such convictions when, as Milgram put it, you are sitting comfortably in your armchair, which is itself located in a house in a peaceful country. But I also base this hypothesis on a

number of factors.

The first is my father's attitude. He always told me that he was convinced, from the very beginning of the war, that the Allies would ultimately prevail, to the point that he and a few comrades who shared the same conviction made plans to meet up on Liberation Day to celebrate the victory. A second factor is his hostility to the Vichy regime. My father told me that in his preparatory class, he had ostentatiously displayed an upside-down photograph of Marshal Pétain on his locker, which his history teacher asked him to remove.

But another factor must be taken into account in my assessment of the ideological position I found myself in during the summer of 1940, namely my distrust of all forms of indoctrination. For example, I never believed for a moment in the virtues of real communism during the 1960s, when my classmates expounded its virtues to me with conviction. I see no reason why I should assume today—even if I imagine myself living in a different intellectual climate—that I would have adhered in any way to the ideology of the National Revolution.

But to say that my intellectual convictions would have led me to acts of resistance does not mean that I would have become involved. Just as I do not think I would have adhered, even tacitly, to the new regime, I cannot imagine myself, like Cordier, training as a saboteur, parachuting into France and living there in constant fear of being arrested and tortured. And I readily echo the words of his friend Frédéric: "It's not for me."

And even without identifying with a hero like Cordier, I find it hard to believe that I would have left France at that time. Like his friend, who was concerned about passing the Polytechnique entrance exam, I think I would have been primarily preoccupied with survival—that is, finding food and shelter—and with preparing for the École Normale entrance exam, in which I had invested a great deal.

But also, more simply, I'm not sure that the idea of going abroad would have occurred to me. The major turning points in our lives, opening up alternative paths that we might have taken in parallel universes to which we have no access, do not present themselves to us with the clarity of the one experienced by Cordier's friend—who explicitly asked him to follow him— and I think that most French people have never felt that they were faced with such a fork in the road.

The story I began at the end of the previous chapter, in which I try to find a place on a boat leaving for North Africa, is therefore

unfortunately a dream. Contrary to the heroic image I was trying to paint of myself above, and which I dreamed of choosing for a time, I am staying in France.

And while feeling nothing but hostility toward Germany and the Vichy government, I continue what I started and what takes up all my time, namely preparing for the École Normale entrance exam.

## CHAPTER II

### 'S [58]INDIGNATION

Ideological disagreement, while a prerequisite, is not enough to explain political commitment, especially when one's own existence is at stake. Every day, the world offers me a spectacle of situations, in France and abroad, where I find myself in complete disagreement with what is happening, without for that reason deciding to become personally involved.

For a further step to be taken, for commitment to occur, this disagreement must cross a certain *threshold* and the situation I am witnessing or involved in must become so psychologically untenable that commitment becomes an inner necessity.

As we shall see, this threshold is not necessarily quantitative—even if the repetition of unbearable scenes can play a role—but rather qualitative, in the sense that the subject finds himself, for one reason or another, and even though he is not defending his objective interests by getting involved, in a situation *where he cannot do otherwise*.

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In my opinion, Romain Gary is one of those who best described this

state of inner compulsion that can lead to commitment. And his

example interests me all the more because he was in Bordeaux in June

1940, very close to where Cordier and I were wondering what we should do, at a time when the future was being decided for the women and men of my generation.

*The Promise of Dawn*, in which this story of a fork in the road is set, recounts Romain Gary's childhood and youth with his mother, Nina Kacew, and describes the indissoluble couple they formed, to the point that the narrative ends with Gary's discovery, on his return from England at the end of the war, of his mother's death.



A colorful character, Nina is a fanciful and impetuous Jewish mother who came to France from Poland and cannot accept France's defeat, which contradicts the idealized vision she has always had of her adopted country. And Gary likes to point out that, while General de Gaulle's call to continue the fight was made on June 18, 1940, his mother's call, attested to by numerous witnesses at the Buffa market, came a day or two [earlier](#) [59].

Gary even goes so far as to hypothesize that the outcome of the war would not have been the same if the command of the French armies had been entrusted to his mother, whose determination was unwavering, rather than to the generals who failed to protect them from defeat. [59] According to , she was not a woman, according to , she at remain without anything to do "behind the Maginot line, with its left flank completely [exposed](#) " [60].

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At the time of the defeat, Gary was at Bordeaux-Mérignac airport, looking for a way to get to England to continue the fight. He and three of his comrades had spotted an available plane and were preparing to board.

Gary already has one foot on the ladder of the aircraft when he is told that his mother has called. She has managed to get through

despite the general chaos and broken communication lines. He asks his friends to take a test flight without him and come back for [him](#)

As he enters the control tower where the telephone is located, Gary glances distractedly at the plane, which has just taken off. While still only a few meters above the ground, the aircraft, piloted by an inexperienced pilot, suddenly seemed to hesitate, reared up, nosed down, and crashed to the ground, exploding. Gary had just lost his three comrades, the first of a hundred who would disappear during World War II [\[62\]](#).

It was thus an involuntary turn of events, a phone call from his mother, that saved Gary's life by preventing him from being with his friends on the plane that crashed, allowing him to fulfill his destiny.

But this stroke of luck should not obscure the fact that he was able to recognize the crucial fork in the road that presented itself to him, between leaving and staying.

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The airport where Gary then wanders around looking for another plane to England once again illustrates this notion of bifurcation. Because there are opportunities for these pilots to leave, fate is played out in these places, both for those who are determined to continue the fight and for the majority who have accepted defeat. This is the case of a general whom Gary discovers in an airplane, writing on a folding table with a revolver within reach, resting on a sheet of paper.

Startled by the presence of the revolver, Gary suddenly understands what is happening. Distraught by the defeat of his army, the general has decided to commit suicide to save his honor. Respectful of such a gesture and anxious not to disturb the soldier as he writes his will, Gary moves away and waits for the shot to be [fired](#)

Surprised after a moment when he hears nothing, he returns several times to the soldier, who is still writing, and finally understands. The general is not writing his last will and testament, but, more calmly, his correspondence. Gary thus realizes that the soldiers at the Mérignac base do not all live in the same world as [him \[64\]](#).

As a counterpoint to the figure of the general, Gary introduces us in the same pages to a young woman named Annick, who asks to meet him at the airport entrance. Annick was the girlfriend of one of Gary's comrades who died in the plane crash, Sergeant Clément, known as Belle-Gueule, for whom she "worked" as [a prostitute \[65\]](#).

Annick learned that her friend had died that morning in the plane crash. She was supposed to join him in England, but her determination did not waver in the face of tragedy. She does not want to work for the Germans and is determined to continue the fight at her level, by going to help the French soldiers, who may feel lonely far from their country [\[66\]](#).

Gary, who himself is struggling to find a way to

join England, cannot promise Annick that he will take her with him.

But in *La Promesse de l'aube*, he pays tribute to this woman who, unlike so many leaders of the time, instinctively understood "what is and is not important " [67].

\*

Despite numerous attempts, Gary is unable to carry out his plans that day. He has to travel via Morocco and Algeria before finding a ship to take him to England, where he finally joins the Lorraine squadron and ends the war with the title of Companion of the Liberation.

So what were the reasons that led Gary to leave France? He explained this in the same chapter of *La Promesse de l'aube*, where he describes the general panic that reigned at Mérignac airport and the network of crossroads that, in a matter of hours, determined his life and that of his comrades.

Gary bears no grudge against the French who accepted the armistice and says he understands those who refused to follow de Gaulle. He goes even further by acknowledging that "they were *right*," which, precisely, should have warned them. This reason, which led them astray, was rooted in their wisdom, their culture, their taste for the humanities—all qualities that make one pessimistic about the human condition and not predisposed to

embark on an uncertain [adventure](#) [68].

To this first argument, that of the excessive wisdom of those who stayed, Gary adds a second, equally decisive one, this time concerning

the influence his mother had on him. The French who made a different choice were not prisoners of his mother's image of France and, having a more measured view of their country, did not feel obliged to defend against all odds the "nursery [tales](#) " of a deluded old woman.

It is therefore due to his mother's irrational influence, as much as to ideological motivations, that Gary, according to him, did not follow the path of reason—which would have required him to join most of his comrades in supporting the Vichy regime—and found the courage to take a different path.

\*

The idea that Romain Gary joined the Free French Forces because of his mother and the idealized image she had of France may raise a smile, but it also contains a grain of truth if we look beyond the outward modesty and exaltation of maternal love to see what is really at stake here.

A first observation concerns the dynamics of commitment. Gary is driven by a force that overwhelms him and to which he is compelled to submit, a form of indignation that goes far beyond simple political disagreement. This is embodied in literary form by his mother, whom the writer transforms into a kind of *dibbouk* [figure](#)

[70] who has taken possession of his personality.

Thus, in a scene set in the non-commissioned officers' mess, the young aviator, as if in a state of possession, begins to speak to his comrades, with his hand on his heart and his fist raised, evoking Guynemer, Joan of Arc, and Bayard. Surprised by the number of clichés that come to mind at his expense, he feels that the voice of his mother, whose will has always been stronger, has taken over and is speaking through him

This indignation was clearly present in Cordier's case, where ideological disagreements were explicit: it was out of loyalty to Maurras that the young man left France. Gary does not spell out the disagreements that led him to leave, as they are obvious. But both men

are marked by a kind of inner compulsion that overcomes their reluctance to commit. Without this compulsion, ideological differences remain purely intellectual—as is the case with my character, the delegate—and cannot be translated into active engagement.

The idea of psychological conflict is not directly mentioned by Gary, but it is represented by the opposition, at Mérignac airport, between the soldiers who decide to enlist and the others. It is the internal constraint that resolves the conflict in those who leave, allowing the forces that encourage resistance to prevail, as in Annick's case, over those that encourage, as in the case of the general in his plane, to continue quietly writing his correspondence.

But the idea of internal constraint is not enough to explain what is happening in Gary, or rather it must be placed in a broader context. To accept such significant risks, which are unreasonable in terms of one's own safety, it is necessary to possess a certain form of psychological organization that allows this type of constraint to be exercised, without which the subject remains in a state of violent ideological disagreement without taking action. What can be said about this psychological makeup? An essential element in Gary, which we already encountered in Cordier, concerns the place of ideal authorities. Gary cannot bear the gap between the reality he faces and the idealized vision of the world that he and his mother have, which is, however, readily accepted by all those whose inaction he ironically approves of.

But this gap between the ideal and reality would not be decisive if the subject did not feel personally involved, that is, if the image he has of himself were not affected by the attacks on this ideal representation, as if it had become part of the self. The image of France that Nina has conceived has been internalized by the writer, and it is therefore he himself who feels directly attacked by his country's defeat and the capitulation of its leaders.

It is therefore a certain *self-image* that lies at the heart of this commitment, or, if you prefer, a certain form of narcissism. This self-

image was formed in Gary's childhood through his mother's gaze, a gaze in which the young Romain saw reflected the idealized destiny of a writer and diplomat that his mother had dreamed for him and that he would eventually [achieve](#) [72].

And this self-image proves decisive in that the self of the person who commits himself is much more permeable than that of other people to what is happening around him, and therefore much less capable of protecting himself, by closing in on himself, from the violence of the world and its continual intrusion into our lives.

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Unfortunately, I fear that my ideals are not the same as Gary's, and in a family whose dream was that someone would one day attend the École Normale Supérieure, I feel no inclination to take such enormous risks in such uncertain historical circumstances.

While I am very critical, like my father, of the Vichy regime, and probably unable to imagine that other paths are possible, I continue on the path I have chosen for myself and leave for Bayonne, then Pau, where my hypokhâgne is successively transferred, following the successive relocations of the preparatory classes.

And so I found myself like my father, in the fall of 1940, at the Lycée Thiers in Marseille. Not seeing what else I could do, in a situation where all my energy was devoted to finding food and studying, and convinced that defending culture was essential in this tragic world I had been thrust into, I decided to continue working for the time being, waiting for better days, and preparing for the difficult entrance exam that was to be held in the spring of 1941, at the end of my first year of khâgne.

## CHAPTER III

### EMPATHY

To say that I continued my student life, like the vast majority of my classmates in the preparatory class, does not mean that I was indifferent to what was happening around me, especially since I deeply dislike the Vichy regime, but in my situation, where everything seems stuck and much of my energy is devoted to finding ways to survive from day to day, I don't really see what I can do except keep working.

But the question of motivation to get involved is not just an abstract political issue. Another factor must be taken into account when assessing my state of mind, namely the actual fate of those around me.

In my situation in 1940, although my daily life had become difficult, I was certainly not directly threatened by the occupying forces or by the government that was gradually coming under their control. In particular, the laws of October 1940 prohibiting Jews from holding public office did not affect me.

The same was not true for a number of people I saw regularly, whose fate was likely to mobilize me. The Lycée Thiers, for example, where I am studying, no longer has any Jewish teachers, and the few Jewish classmates I had at the beginning of the school year have

gradually stopped coming to class. Is this enough to make me abandon

the cautious attitude I have adopted until now?

Few communities were as sensitive to the plight of others during the last war as that of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, and I would like to take advantage of the transition offered by Romain Gary to mention this episode. Le Chambon appears in his last novel, *Les Cerfs-volants*, whose narrator, Ludo, who suffers from hypermnesia, has memorized the names of all the children saved by the community of Le Chambon and enjoys

from time to time reciting them from memory, so as not to lose his memory and because the heart, he says, "needs exercise [73]."

Le Chambon-sur-Lignon is a village in the Cévennes region, home for centuries to a strong Protestant community, descendants of all those who fled Louis XIV's dragonnades.

When World War II broke out, it therefore had a long tradition of resistance to oppression and protection of those persecuted by the central government.

The community was led by Pastor André Trocmé. With the help of his wife Martha, another pastor, Édouard Theis, and most of the inhabitants, he decided to transform the village into a vast refuge for Jews persecuted by the Germans and the Vichy police, especially children.

A whole network of protection was thus set up. Most of the inhabitants of Le Chambon agreed to take in one or more children. The children lived with them, but in case of an alert, they would leave the houses where they lived and take refuge in the nearby forest, returning to their homes afterwards. The safety of the refugees was all the more assured because the inhabitants of Le Chambon were very discreet about their activities, even within the village, and often did not know what their neighbors were [doing](#) .

The village's reputation quickly spread, and persecuted children flocked there from all over France. Despite the many suspicions surrounding the Protestant community, it continued its rescue work

until the end of the war. Learning that he was in danger of being assassinated, André Trocmé was forced to leave the village shortly before Liberation, but in total, nearly 5,000 children were saved thanks to the community he led.

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André and Martha Trocmé, along with the other villagers, embody a different kind of resistance than that of Daniel Cordier or Romain Gary, often referred to as

"Righteous." This term refers to people who, in times of conflict or persecution, save human lives at the risk of their own. It was through actions of this kind that many Jews, particularly in France, owed their lives during the last war.

Within the group of resistance fighters, Todorov introduced a useful distinction between heroes and the Righteous—whom he prefers to call

"rescuers"—a distinction that relates both to their mode of action and their psychological profile. While heroes seek to fight the enemy with weapons in their hands, the Righteous are not concerned with military action:

Rescuers do not recognize themselves in the heroic model. When, long after the war, people come to congratulate them and tell them that they behaved like heroes, they vehemently deny it. Why? First, because unlike heroes, they consider the life of the individual to be of unparalleled value and do not worship death. Moreover, heroes are, in principle, dead, whereas they have often survived: they never seek to sacrifice themselves, and the risks they take are calculated. Saving human lives is the very definition of their job t ;

as a result, they refuse to sacrifice their own lives to defend those of others [75].

The only concern of the Just is to save [lives](#) [76]. André Trocmé, a pacifist who refused to fight or lay a hand on an opponent under any circumstances, is in this sense entirely representative of this figure. As such, he must be distinguished from armed combatants such as Cordier or Gary, whom Todorov describes as heroes.

Because of the type of action they defend, heroes are often inclined to show off, or at least to draw attention to themselves. The effectiveness of the Righteous, on the contrary, lies in their invisibility. This is why the actions of so many Righteous remain unknown for a long time, if not forever, given that many of them, even after the end of the historical episode that led them to act, have no desire to emerge from [anonymity](#) [77].

The Righteous are often all the more unknown because they do not dwell on their actions, considering them to be self-evident and therefore not worthy of special comment:

There were many women in Le Chambon whose kitchens witnessed events similar to those that took place in Magda Trocmé's. There was, for example, Mrs. Eyraud, with her round face and sparkling eyes [...]. When I asked her why she felt compelled to take in these refugees who brought with them so many dangers and problems, including the obligation to lie to the authorities, she never really understood what I was getting at. Her big eyes lost their sparkle and she said to me:

"Listen. Listen. Who would have taken care of them if we hadn't? They needed our help, and they needed it *then*." For her, and for me, who was experiencing the contagious joy of her warm smile, the choice became clear: there is no cause

more urgent than that of *people who need help at that* [moment](#) [78].

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What the Righteous show us, especially when they constitute an

entire village, is that concern for what happens to others—beyond major ideological disagreements—is an essential element of personal commitment. This concern seems particularly developed in certain individuals, who are endowed with what is known as an *altruistic personality*.

This type of personality was analyzed by two American researchers, Samuel and Pearl Oliner, in their book, *The Altruistic Personality* , in which they study the testimonies of several hundred Righteous who undertook to save Jews during World War II. They thus identified a certain psychological profile among these rescuers, the presence of which seems to be decisive in their commitment.

According to Samuel and Pearl Oliner, in order to be considered altruistic, a behavior must meet a number of criteria. It must be aimed at helping others, involve real risk to the perpetrator, provide no benefit to the perpetrator, and be voluntary [80]. This behavior is not limited to rescuing persecuted people, but it often took this form during World War II, where it was adopted by some with remarkable consistency over time.

For Samuel and Pearl Oliner, the commitment of these Righteous was explained by "the importance they attached to helping anyone in need, regardless of their culture, race, or religion, which the two authors call 'helping values' ". These values are perfectly illustrated by Martha Trocmé's testimony to Philip Hallie:

"I have a kind of principle. I'm not a good Christian at all, but there are things I believe in. First, I believe, and always have believed, in André Trocmé; I have been loyal to his projects and to him as a person. My second principle is that I try not to look for things to do. I don't look

for people to help. But I never close my door, never refuse to help someone who comes to me and asks for something. That, I think, is my form of religion. It's my way of behaving. When things happen, not things I plan, but things sent to me by God or by chance,

when people come knocking at my door, I feel responsible [\[82\]](#)."

However, Martha Trocmé is never explicit about this sense of responsibility



, as if she had nothing in particular to say about it:

When I tried to push her to justify this sense of responsibility, she quickly became impatient. Once, pressed by my questions, she lowered her head, looked away as if she were about to be less than entirely sincere—but that was all my stupid stubbornness deserved— and said: "I enjoy doing these things, yes, I enjoy them, just as others enjoy watching movies. I find it fun to help people, no matter how difficult it is. " Another time, she told me, with the same lack of candor: "Well, who knows? Maybe I'll need help one day!" We had reached rock bottom; it was impossible to get any deeper into her thoughts. My silly questions annoyed her because she herself was the answer, not her words or even her

thoughts [83].

For Samuel and Pearl Oliner, this focus on helping others was often linked to the happy childhoods of these Righteous. These values were passed on to them within their families, and the strength of their unconscious bond with their parents played an important role in shaping their personalities, which developed sufficient strength to enable them to engage in actions that put their lives at risk.

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Going further in their analysis of the values of caring ("Values of Caring [84]") that underpin altruistic personality in action, Samuel and Pearl Oliner identified several catalysts ("catalysts [85]") that may have determined these subjects to get involved. Some reacted according to the social group to which they belonged and the norms that prevailed there. Others did so because of general principles that they felt were being violated by the historical situation they were experiencing.

But a third reason for intervention deserves particular attention,

namely the *capacity for empathy*. Drawing inspiration from the example of the Righteous of Le Chambon, Michel Terestchenko analyzed the ability of certain individuals to feel what others are feeling from a distance, and with such acuity that they are able to find within themselves the strength to help others at the risk of their own lives [86].

This capacity for empathy has attracted the attention of psychologists, who have sought to demonstrate it experimentally. This is particularly the case of Daniel Batson [87], who, with his team, attempted to test in the laboratory this quality, which seems to be more or less developed in human beings and can prove decisive when it comes to taking certain actions for the benefit of others.

This is the case in an experiment—which builds on Milgram's work—where subjects whose empathy is being tested watch a young woman named Elaine being subjected to electric shocks behind a screen. Elaine is supposedly chosen at random from a group of volunteers, but is in fact an actress. The originality of the experiment, compared to Milgram's, lies in the fact that this time the participants are offered the opportunity to end the "victim's" suffering if they agree to take her place.

Several scenarios are considered. In some cases ("easy escape "), the test subjects are told from the outset that they will only witness the first two shocks. They can therefore leave the experiment without

having to endure the spectacle of suffering for which they would be indirectly responsible. This is not the case in the other situation ("difficult [escape \[89\]](#)"), where they are forced to stay until the end.

Furthermore, and more importantly, in order to measure the degree of empathy of the test subjects, they are given information about the young woman's personality and tastes, which is invented to make her more or less similar to themselves, in order to study the extent to which similarities with this stranger play a role in the decision to help her.

What is clear is that participants are more likely to intervene ("high [empathy "](#)) and take Elaine's place—even when they could easily leave the room—when they believe that the young woman shares many similarities with them and they recognize themselves in her. Conversely, they appear to be much less inclined to help her when they do not recognize these similarities [\[91\]](#).

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What this last point shows is that we are

all the more inclined to feel empathy for someone when we identify with that person. Sober and Wilson, who analyzed Batson's experiment, put it this way:

Empathy is sometimes contrasted with sympathy, with empathy implying identification with others, while sympathy implies a more distant variety of emotional connection. What does "identification" mean here? It is sometimes explained as implying that empathy involves breaking down the boundary between oneself and others [92].

Empathy, in those who are born with it or develop it during their lifetime, has the effect of making the Other, at least in part, oneself. This can explain high-risk rescue behaviors, which feel all the more natural because the person is, in a way, saving themselves by helping the Other and therefore performing an act that, while surprising to outsiders, is obvious to them.

In the most empathetic behaviors, such as those studied by Batson, it is truly a matter of putting oneself in the other person's shoes, in the physical sense. This is what the organizer proposes in Elaine's experiment by asking the subjects how far they are willing to go and what they are willing to sacrifice of themselves to end the suffering of a stranger.

And this is what the Righteous do in a way in turbulent periods of history, not only by intensely experiencing the suffering of the Other within themselves, but by taking it on physically, so to speak, since they place themselves in the situation, agreeing to come to their aid, to take the same risks, and to suffer the same fate.

This identification with the Other could also explain why many

Righteous were reluctant to talk about their rescue efforts. They felt that their actions were so self-evident that they saw no particular reason to talk about them, just as we would see no reason to justify behaviors that are simply common sense. It is this reluctance to speak out, as much as the necessary discretion with which these actions are carried out, that means so many of them remain unknown and may remain so forever.

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While I believe Todorov's distinction between heroes and rescuers is valid, it should not be applied rigidly. First of all, there are many cases of resistance fighters who behaved as both heroes and rescuers. Furthermore, there are acts of protest that do not fall into either of these categories because they borrow from both or constitute attenuated forms of both

But above all, if we do not limit ourselves to analyzing resistance behaviors and try to perceive their unconscious motivations, there are commonalities between these different attitudes of engagement, the main one being the ability to detach oneself from oneself and one's own interests in order to take an interest in the Other, that is, to cross the boundary that isolates us from the world. What the Righteous feel within themselves as an internal aggression when others are affected is reminiscent of how Gary felt personally attacked by the blows that reality dealt to the maternal ideal. In both cases, the boundaries between the self and the other are crossed.

What about me? At Thiers High School, where I continued my studies in 1940-1941, I watched with dismay as anti-Semitic legislation was introduced which, from October 1940, excluded Jews from the civil service and prohibited certain teachers from continuing their profession. Even more than that, I felt angry about what was happening to them, an anger made all the stronger because I could easily imagine myself in their place, seeing no difference between my

classmates and myself. So I did not feel that I lacked empathy.

But am I prepared to take risks to help them, like those who will take Elaine's place? Things are not that simple. If they were, many of us would be mobilizing to help those excluded from our communities, or at least publicly expressing our disagreement. But few of us do, not because we are insensitive to what is happening, but because we are weighed down by a whole host of reasons that lead us to do nothing.

At this stage in my thinking, it is therefore necessary, after identifying the factors that play in favor of my commitment (ideological disagreement, indignation, empathy), to weigh them against

other factors that work against it and prevent most of my comrades and myself from acting, at least for the moment, even though we disapprove of what is happening before our eyes.

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This was also the case with my father, who does not seem to have been under any internal pressure that would have forced him to enlist—but then again, I can only judge from the letters he left me—while he was studying in Marseille during 1940–1941 and then in Aix the following year, where he enrolled in the Faculty of Arts. I am therefore tempted to believe that I would have acted in the same way as him, with one major difference that I feel it is important to explain here, even though it does not concern the question of enlistment, but rather our life together as students.

My father failed the entrance exam for the École Normale at the end of his preparatory year in Marseille, at the end of the 1941 academic year, and decided not to retake it, even though he was just below the pass mark and therefore, for a first attempt, in a very respectable position. This decision, which had a profound impact on me as a child, always seemed unacceptable to me, and I discussed it with him several times without ever understanding it. How can you not persevere in the face of adversity?



That is why our paths diverge here. I do not have my father's resigned character, and it is unthinkable for me not to retake an exam that I failed the first time. Assuming that the high standard of the exams at the time prevented me from passing the first year, I am sure that I will succeed on my second attempt and, succeeding where he failed, I therefore entered the École normale in the spring of 1942.

# INTERNAL

RELUCTANCE

# CHAPTER ONE

## FEAR

It is therefore not absurd to think that I found myself at the École normale supérieure during the war. This is certainly fiction, but it is more plausible than other biographical versions in which I accompany Cordier and Gary to England or become a collaborator, given what my family was like at the time, my literary tastes, and what I have become today. My father's testimony, my knowledge of myself and my reactions in similar circumstances, and the way in which the young people of my generation behaved en masse lead me to suppose this virtual existence in which I can recognize myself.

At the School, I found myself in an environment that suited me well, both intellectually and politically. The work of historians has shown that, with a few notable exceptions—including the director of the school, Jérôme Carcopino, who was compromised by the Vichy regime [94]—those who reside there are hostile to the government in power, and I find myself, if I may say so, in my element.

Am I now going to commit myself to this cause? Answering this question requires careful consideration not only of the reasons for acting, but also the reasons that might dissuade a young man like me, born in 1922, from doing so, and with all the more caution given

that the vast majority of those who shared my ideas in the 1940s, including in the École normale, which was hostile to the National Revolution, did not commit themselves or did so only late in the day.

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The obvious reason why I am not committing myself to teacher training, at least initially – and this was also the case when I was studying for my khâgne in Marseille – is that I am afraid of doing so and this fear is paralyzing me.

It is not my hope for the future that is being undermined here. Apart from the fact that I am optimistic by nature and do not let myself get easily discouraged, an objective analysis of the military situation shows that there is no reason to despair at this point. In this academic year of 1942-1943—a year marked by the German defeat at Stalingrad—the final victory of the Allies seems increasingly likely to me, as it does to my comrades.

It is therefore not fear of this kind that hinders my ability to act, but more simply the physical fear of being arrested, mistreated, tortured. And I admire those, heroes or Righteous Among the Nations, whom this fear has not stopped. Wondering what motivated the members of the White Rose to overcome this fear, Isabelle Hausser writes:

We can sense the moral and spiritual crisis that tormented them in the last years of their lives. However, we still do not know, and will probably never know, what drove them to the scaffold. There is no doubt that other Germans, young and old, were tortured by their consciences and horrified by the crimes committed in the name of the German people. Some, like Robert Scholl, Hans and Sophie's father, sometimes went so far as to express this, even if it meant going to prison. However, the risks involved often outweighed their consciences. This brings us back to the unanswerable question: what inner mechanism enabled these young people to break down the barriers of fear? What ideas, what faith strengthened them to the point of making them

forget death [95]?

The White Rose was an informal movement that formed in Munich in 1942, whose most famous members were Hans and Sophie Scholl. Deeply religious, they disagreed with the Hitler regime, which they had initially supported wholeheartedly but gradually began to realize the extent of its crimes. They decided to break away from it and try to rally the German people against it.

Their family background predisposed them to this, as Hans and

Sophie's father, Robert Scholl, had spent four months in prison for criticizing Hitler in a private conversation—he had called him "God's scourge"—and had been denounced by the woman he was talking to. Hans himself, before being arrested for his resistance activities, had had difficulties with the German police.

They decided to distribute leaflets in Munich and other German cities calling for opposition to the dictatorship through passive resistance. The leaflets were extremely violent towards the Hitler regime, which they claimed was criminal on a moral level

and politically leading Germany to ruin.

They were arrested shortly after the end of the siege of Stalingrad, when the sixth text was published on February 18, 1943. As they were throwing leaflets from a window in the atrium of Munich University, they were spotted by the janitor, who reported them to the police. They were immediately arrested, tried before a court headed by prosecutor Roland Freisler, who had been brought in specially from Berlin, sentenced to death, and executed.

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There are many reasons why I have chosen the example of the most famous group of German resistance fighters to reflect on fear, but the most obvious is that I can easily identify with their personalities and their methods. And their situation was not very different from mine in 1942-1943, when I was spending my first year at the École Normale Supérieure, the very year they were arrested.

I actually feel I have more in common with these intellectuals, academics, and students than with Daniel Cordier, the far-right activist who became Jean Moulin's secretary, or with a Protestant pastor like André Trocmé. They were neither women or men of action, nor saints in dialogue with God, but measured intellectuals, more accustomed to thinking and writing than to fighting, who only became activists as a last resort.

Another similarity lies in the type of action they ultimately decided to take. Minimal action, which I can also identify with, since it is an extension of intellectual reflection and its logical conclusion. Faced with a regime they oppose but which controls all means of information and forbids them from expressing themselves in the press or in books, the members of the White Rose express and disseminate their disapproval in leaflets, i.e., in what is most familiar to me, texts.

s an action- , which may seem less dangerous in its



immediate consequences, since this was not a matter of opposing the regime through violence, but simply of expressing oneself publicly in writing, without physically attacking anyone—even though the White Rose texts were highly critical of Hitler's policies—and merely throwing leaflets through a window.

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It is obvious that Germans who might have been tempted to oppose Nazism, even verbally, were paralyzed by fear. We can try to gauge the extent of this fear by reading accounts of daily life under the Third Reich, such as that of Charlotte Beradt [96], who set out to collect the dreams of Germans during this period to show the extent of the disorganization of mental life under totalitarianism.

In her account of the activities of the White Rose, Inge Scholl, the sister of Hans and Sophie, described the general atmosphere in Germany after the Nazis seized power:

A feeling arose within us: that of living in a clean and beautiful house where, in the basement, behind locked doors, terrible things were happening. Slowly, fear, then horror and anguish, guided us; and the first seed, still tiny, of boundless insecurity took root within us [97].

In this house, whose basement had become a place of horror, the mere expression of opposition to the regime was enough to lead to arrest and death, or even outright disappearance:

More and more often, we learned from the newspapers that men who had spoken out against the demonic tyranny, even if only in words, had been sentenced to death by the People's Court. Today, a well-known pianist was imprisoned; tomorrow, an engineer, a worker, or the director of a company. Then priests, students, or even a senior officer, such as Hudet,

who was dismissed at the very moment when he was beginning to become troublesome. Men s disappeared without a trace, like the flame of a candle blown out by a

storm [98].

This terror weighed heavily on all those who attempted acts of resistance, such as the members of the White Rose, who distributed leaflets in various German cities and lived in fear until the moment of distribution:

How well we slept on the train home, the empty suitcase innocently placed in the luggage rack, after successfully completing such a journey...

But also, what anxiety when a gaze scrutinized them. What anguish when a

man approached, and what relief when he continued on his way. They had to constantly cover their tracks, evade the police, and take every precaution [99].

And on the night before the last day, as if in a final warning from fate, Sophie Scholl, plunged into a nightmare that had become reality, dreamed that the Gestapo was coming to arrest her and her brother [100].

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Like Inge Scholl's testimony, the texts left to us by Hans and Sophie Scholl give us a glimpse of the anguish experienced by those who tried to oppose the Hitler regime from within. The resistance activities they were planning are not mentioned, of course—especially since the group members believed that their correspondence had been read by the Gestapo since their father's arrest—but the description of the fear in which they lived gives us an idea of what was happening.

In this letter from Sophie Scholl to her friend Fritz Hartnagel, she writes:

The uncertainty in which we live today, which prevents us from making carefree plans for tomorrow and casts a shadow over the days ahead, oppresses me and does not leave me for a minute, day or night. When will the time finally come when we will be freed from the obligation to focus all our energy and attention on things that are not worth lifting a finger for? Every word must be examined from every angle before it is uttered, to ensure that there is no p

not even the slightest ambiguity. Trust in others must give way to mistrust and caution [101].

Or, a few days later:

Oh Fritz, if I can't write anything else right now, it is because there is something terribly

ridiculous about the spectacle of someone drowning and, instead of calling for help, launching into a grand speech on a scientific, philosophical, or theological theme, while the sinister tentacles of sea creatures entwine his arms and legs and the waves close in around him; it's just that fear is in me, nothing but fear, and that I ardently desire the one who will

deliver me from it [102].

And the same feelings are described by Hans in a letter to Rose

Nägele two days before his arrest:

Today, I must be who I am. I am far from you, both outwardly and inwardly, but never detached. Never has my respect for the purity of your heart been greater than it is today, now that life has become a constant danger. But because I chose this danger, I must move toward my chosen destination freely and without attachment. I have strayed many times, I know. Abyssees yawn and the darkest night envelops my searching heart, but I persevere

against all odds [103].

We find ourselves here at the heart of an ethical conflict, but one that takes a different form from that encountered by Browning's killers. The young resistance fighters are not torn between two contradictory injunctions or two forms of superego—the prohibition against disobeying or appearing cowardly to their friends and the prohibition against killing—but between an inner obligation to protest and the fear of dying. And yet it is not this fear, which was absent in Browning, that will prevail among them.

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To the question posed by Isabelle Hausser in her presentation of the Scholl correspondence: "Would we have had their strength of character

[104]?" I can answer with some certainty, at least in my own case, that we would not. This answer is based primarily on a statistical principle inspired by Milgram's experiment. Given that, out of a population of several million people, only a few thousand would have taken up the fight, I have no reason to believe that I would have been among them. And it is a fact that at the École normale supérieure, during the early years, despite the general hostility towards the Vichy regime, few of my fellow students joined the [Resistance](#) [105].

I am not surprised, however, by my lack of reaction, as I know myself well enough to understand that physical fear plays a decisive

role in my behavior and would do so if I were to entertain the idea, as the Scholls did, of making my thoughts known to the French people, even if the general context of the Vichy regime was perhaps a little less terrifying for those who wanted to distribute texts under the counter than that of Nazi Germany.

In general, I find that studies on commitment do not take sufficient account of this dimension of fear, which is nevertheless obvious, and the way in which it interferes with life choices, dissuading most people of good will from committing themselves, even when they completely disagree with the decisions that are made or the actions they see taking place before their eyes, and even though they are capable of feeling what the victims are going through.

"Why," asks one of the White Rose leaflets, "do so many citizens remain indifferent in the face of these abominable crimes?"

[106] ?" Personally, I don't believe that so many people are indifferent to collective crimes. The impression they give of being indifferent and looking the other way stems from the fact that they are paralyzed by fear, which prevents them from thinking, and from thinking for themselves about what they might consider to be even the most minimal act of protest.

This misunderstanding of the role of fear often leads, in a reductive after-the-fact analysis, to an artificial division of the population of countries under dictatorship into resisters and supporters of the

regime, ignoring the considerable number of people who disapprove of what is happening but do not find within themselves the strength, as the Scholls did, to break through the barriers of fear.

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What could have led Hans and Sophie Scholl and their friends to take such insane risks and engage in an endeavor they knew was doomed to failure? Or, to use Isabelle Hausser's own words, what inner mechanism enabled these young people, caught between conflicting imperatives, to find the strength to express their feelings?

Here we find the various elements I identified above, namely ideological disagreement and indignation. We can add empathy, with members of the White Rose expressing concern for persecuted Polish [Jews](#) , and undoubtedly also, at the very roots of empathy, a peaceful family atmosphere that fostered a sense of inner security conducive to the development of values of helping others. And religious faith obviously played an important role in their entry into the resistance.

But these various motivations, which were undoubtedly shared by many Germans, would not alone suffice to explain their ability to overcome fear. We therefore return to this mysterious inner compulsion that leaves the subject with no choice and

, so to speak, deprived of a decision that imposes itself on them despite everything and overcomes their reluctance.

Can we try to take a step further in elucidating what appears to be an enigma? One factor that seems decisive among the members of the White Rose is *the feeling that they are not* alone—even though objectively they are—both at the time of their actions and in the future, when their actions will be recognized.

In their struggle, the members of the White Rose had a decisive conviction: they were not alone in their thinking, and only fear prevented other Germans from joining them. This argument appears at the beginning of the first leaflet:

There is nothing more unworthy of a civilized people than to allow themselves to be ruled, without resistance, by the obscure whims of a clique of friends and en . Is every honest German not ashamed of his [government](#) today?

This argument is repeated throughout the following leaflets, which are based on the conviction that the majority of Germans actually share the opinion of the members of the White Rose, but do not dare to express themselves, let alone engage in acts of resistance:

Many, perhaps most, readers of these pages wonder how resistance can be effective. They do not consider the possibilities. We will show you that everyone is capable of cooperating in the abolition of this regime [\[109\]](#).

The same argument is repeated by Sophie Scholl, according to her sister, in one of her rare statements at her trial:

The three young defendants sat facing them. They stood very straight, calm and alone. They answered frankly and calmly. Sophie spoke very little. Once, however, she said:

"What we have said and written, many people think. But they don't dare to express it [\[110\]](#)."



But this feeling of not being alone does not only apply to the present. The members of the White Rose were also convinced that those who came after them and judged their actions would support them in hindsight and recognize the legitimacy of what they had done, while condemning those who had remained inactive. Their writings reveal a fear that Germans would one day be criticized for not having resisted:

Who among us can foresee the weight of ignominy that will fall upon us and our children when the blindfold that now blinds us has been removed and the extreme atrocity of these crimes is revealed?

Thus, the members of the White Rose were certain that they belonged to a community, both present and future, from which they could draw moral support. This feeling of not being alone is essential because it can help overcome, if not physical fear itself, which remains the major obstacle, then at least the *fear of thinking*, and encourage the emergence, within a totalitarian system, of representations that differ from those mass-produced by the system, including representations of the means of action.

The feeling that one is not alone and that others are secretly participating in a different thought process is a component of what emerges from the Scholls' writings, namely the importance of having *independent thought* at the very heart of collective thought, of keeping for oneself, with good reason to believe that one is not delusional, a unique territory for reflection. [112].

The possibility of developing independent thinking is obviously not enough to overcome physical fear, which is the main obstacle preventing many people who are outraged by injustice from taking action. But by opening up reflection to other avenues, it can help to form virtual representations of this transition and to outline the first steps of a resistance movement.

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This intimate feeling of not being alone which is all the easier to

develop at the École normale, where I am surrounded by friends who share my convictions and where the virtual community that surrounded the Scholls is very real here—and even visible in this place of opposition to power located in the heart of the Latin Quarter—is not enough for the moment to overcome my fear and encourage me to take action.

Even though I have never heard of the members of the White Rose, I feel a similar anger towards a regime that deprives us of our freedoms, increasingly clearly shows its support for Nazi Germany, and attacks the weakest members of French society.

But above all, I feel the intense fear described by the young German resistance fighters. And I only have to walk through the streets of Paris, outside the haven of peace that is the École Normale, and come across platoons of German soldiers or French police to feel it physically. Is there any shame in admitting it, when I imagine what becomes of those who try to resist?

Furthermore, physical fear, which is decisive in my case, is only one of the factors that dissuade me from resisting, and, although it is sufficient in my case, it is mixed with other more secret motives that I cannot keep silent about. There are countless reasons for doing nothing in my situation, and on reflection, fear is perhaps only a convenient mask for their complexity.

## CHAPTER II

### FRAMES OF REFERENCE

If fear is the essential element that prevents me from committing myself, and if it is sufficient to explain my inaction, it is far from being the only one, and it is not necessarily the most pernicious. It plays a role in certain circumstances, but it also happens that it does not intervene, or rather that it serves to conceal, since it is excusable, less avowable feelings.

It is not only to avoid physical abuse that we refrain from getting involved. Other more subtle fears—as we saw with Browning's killers, who feared above all the gaze of their comrades—often lurk in the background, dissuading us from taking risks and encouraging us to keep quiet and avoid drawing attention to ourselves. Or, if you prefer, to dissuade us from creating forks in the road where there are none or where they are not clearly marked.

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In 1939, Aristides de Sousa Mendes was Portuguese consul in Bordeaux, and therefore also lived near where I am now and where so many life trajectories are beginning to take shape. A diplomat by

training, like his brother who would go on to hold ministerial posts, he was no anarchist.

In the looming conflict, Portugal's dictator Salazar chose, like Franco, to remain neutral, although as the war progressed he gave increasing signs of collusion with the Allies. However, this benevolent neutrality did not extend to embracing humanist values or coming to the aid of refugees.

On November 13, Sousa Mendes, like all Portuguese diplomats stationed abroad, received a circular from his ministry, numbered 14. This considerably restricted the issuance of visas to foreign nationals wishing to travel to Portugal, particularly refugees, those who had been stripped of their nationality, or those who might be expected to encounter difficulties if they returned to their country. to Portugal, particularly refugees, those stripped of their nationality, or those who might face difficulties if they returned to their country. Jews were obviously the primary [target](#) [113].

For all these categories of applicants, there is no automatic refusal of a visa, but the consular authorities must seek the prior approval of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which, in wartime, amounts to considerably delaying, if not rendering impossible, the granting of a visa within a reasonable time. With a few exceptions, this is therefore a disguised refusal.

However, with the defeat of the Allies in the spring of 1940, refugees flocked to Bordeaux by the thousands, hoping to cross into Spain or embark for England:

On June 14, Bordeaux once again became the capital of a France that had just suffered the worst defeat in its history. The line of official cars crossed the stone bridge in the evening. The Romanian ambassador had to sleep in his car for two nights while waiting for accommodation. Philippe Pétain and Pierre Laval moved into the town hall, while Weygand took up residence on Rue Vital-Carles. De Gaulle stayed at the Majestic Hotel, close to Quai Louis-XVIII.

From his window, the man who is leaving for England in two days' time can perhaps see the huge line of refugees waiting in front of the Portuguese consulate in the hope of receiving the visa that could save their lives. The Nazi armies are arriving and, come what may, whether you are a r have a Jewish name or have fought against totalitarianism, you

must leave France as quickly as possible [114].

Among these refugees was a rabbi, Jacob Kruger, with whom Sousa Mendes became friends and whom he offered to take into his apartment. He initially attempted to obtain permission to issue visas for Kruger and his family, but on June 13, he was confronted with Circular 14 [115]. Previous requests made by the diplomat to Salazar regarding the attitude to adopt towards refugees had always received the same response, namely that the circular, which required authorization from the ministry, must be respected.

Kruger then pointed out to his new friend that the problem did not concern him alone. He drew his attention to the risks faced by the refugees, particularly the Jews, if they were unable to leave France as soon as possible, and to the fact that, if a solution was to be found, it would have to be much more general and cover the thousands of people whose lives were in danger.

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Faced with this dramatic situation and the problem presented to him by Kruger, Sousa Mendes had one of the most surprising reactions I heard about while researching this book: he went to bed.

Of course, neither Sousa Mendes nor Rabbi Kruger could have imagined the unimaginable, the absolute horror of the Holocaust. "My brothers are risking their lives," Kruger told Sousa Mendes.

Pedro Nuno, who was present during the conversation, recounts: "My father suddenly looked so frightened, as if he had just caught a sudden illness! He looked at us and went to bed

[116]."

And Sousa Mendes, like an exile from the world, remained in his room for three days without giving any news:

Thousands of refugees waited, guarded by soldiers in uniform.

In his room, a man tosses and turns in bed, sweating, moaning occasionally. A tormented man who refuses any help from his family.

This went on for three days and three nights.

Three days, and three nights during which Aristides de Sousa Mendes had no contact with the

outside world [117].

No one will ever know what happened during those three days of isolation, but one can imagine the suffering felt by the diplomat lost in his thoughts, isolated in the face of an ethical conflict whose resolution would determine the course of his entire life.

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When he left his room on the morning of the fourth day, June 16, Sousa Mendes decided to act:

"My father," Pedro Nuno recounts, "got up as if he were reassured and filled with immense energy. He got up, shaved, got dressed, and then he left his room, opened the door to the chancellery, and said aloud: 'From now on, I will give visas to everyone. There are no more nationalities, races, or religions.'" "Pedro Nuno continues: "Then our father told us that he had heard a voice, that of his conscience or that of God, dictating to him the course

of action to take, and that it was very clear to him [118]."



And Sousa Mendes did not hold back, deciding to issue Portuguese visas to *all* refugees who requested them. With the help of Rabbi Kruger, he began signing all the passports submitted to him, which were then stamped by the consulate secretary, José Seabra.

On Monday, June 17, as de Gaulle flew to England and I watched from

Royan, paralyzed with fear, as France was defeated,

rumor that visas were being easily granted at the Portuguese consulate

spread throughout Bordeaux, and the number of refugees continued to grow. The same was true in the days that followed, when Sousa Mendes signed passports left and right, reducing his signature to a minimum to speed up the process and exempting refugees from registration [fees \[119\]](#).

And he did not limit his actions to Bordeaux. Even when Salazar, alerted to the considerable number of visas Sousa Mendes had issued, demanded that his activities be stopped, he went to Bayonne, where there was another consulate under his jurisdiction, also besieged by refugees. There he set up an operation identical to the one in Bordeaux, even going so far as to set up a table in the street to speed up the signing process and prevent the staircase leading to the consulate from [collapsing \[120\]](#).

And he continued on to Hendaye on June 22, where he took the necessary equipment with him, signing all the passports that came into his hands, but also, when refugees wanting to go to Spain did not have any, simple sheets of paper or pieces of [newspaper \[121\]](#).

And this despite the fact that he no longer had any power to do so:

On June 23, when the decree canceling de Gaulle's promotion to brigadier general was published, by a strange and glorious coincidence, Salazar sent a telegram to Bordeaux withdrawing most of Aristides de Sousa Mendes' powers, including the ability to sign visas. Until then, the consul had certainly taken every possible liberty with his government's instructions, but he still had a certain degree of legality. From the moment Salazar's

telegram was sent, he was acting illegally [\[122\]](#).

This did not prevent him from continuing to sign visas (he issued more than 30,000 in total), refusing to obey orders from Lisbon and Salazar's emissaries, who demanded his resignation. When the Germans arrived at the Spanish border and blocked the crossings, he helped a group of refugees to cross, taking them with him and taking advantage of a border post that had no telephone and had not received instructions from Madrid in time [123].

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One of the peculiarities of this story is the way in which Sousa

Mendes managed to convince himself, against all evidence, that his actions would be recognized by Salazar.

It was not entirely unfounded to think so, given that the dictator had chosen—as defeats mounted for the Axis forces and precautions had to be taken for the postwar period—to present his country as a privileged place of refuge for foreigners.

This illusion did not last, and Salazar, furious at this large-scale disobedience, never forgave Sousa Mendes for his attitude. Despite numerous attempts to reconcile with the dictator, Sousa Mendes ended his life in extreme poverty.

It was only many years later that his actions at the beginning of the Second World War were recognized by the Portuguese authorities. Honored in 1966 by Yad Vashem, he had to wait until 1995 for the President of the Portuguese Republic to rehabilitate his memory and award him a posthumous decoration.

One can imagine that Sousa Mendes' denial of reality regarding Salazar's reaction was one of the psychological conditions that allowed him to develop the independent thinking necessary to overcome fear, since he fantasized, contrary to common sense, that he was not alone.

The main reason why so few civil servants would intervene in a similar case is because of the personal risks involved. José-Alain Fralon showed in his book on Sousa Mendes that his attitude—the result of long reflection during which he weighed the consequences of his actions—was far from unanimous among those close to him. This was the case with the consulate secretary, José Seabra, who tried to calm Sousa Mendes's enthusiasm for signing:

It is not with a light heart that the consular secretary participates in this blatant, deliberate, and repeated violation of the rules. He is torn between his respect for order, his fear, and the genuine affection he feels for his consul and the task he knows is being generously accomplished. He tries to convince Sousa Mendes:

"For the love of your wife, for the love of your children, stop, we beg you,

you are ruining your life and that of your [family](#) !"

And, even more difficult to accept, Sousa Mendes' family was not unanimous in its support for the diplomat's actions:

While Pedro Nuno, in the name of his Christian faith, fully approved of his father's actions and helped him as best he could in the time left to him between preparing for his exams, the other children were much more skeptical. José, still carrying his sadness and bitterness, took refuge in the piano. His older sister, Isabelle, who in 1937 had married Jules d'Aout, a descendant of Davout, the Marshal of the Empire, arrived with her husband.

Although they want to flee the Germans and seek refuge in Portugal, they do not understand Aristides' reasons either. In their view, their father and stepfather are taking unnecessary risks. Isabelle insists:

" , Father, you must stop, you mustn't take such risks, you must think of your future and ours [\[125\]](#)!"

Sousa Mendes therefore experienced an ethical conflict, both within his family and, we can assume, within himself. He could not ignore, even if he tried to convince himself otherwise, that his rebellion marked the end of his professional life, as Salazar's reaction amply confirmed.

And those who are responsible for a family can also understand why Sousa Mendes, father of fourteen children, hesitated before making a decision that could have negative consequences for his loved ones. For

it was not only his own destiny he was gambling with, but also that of his family, whose future he was seriously compromising.

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Of course, with hindsight, it is absurd to think that one could weigh

the lives of thousands of people against one's career in the civil service or the comfort of one's family, especially when, unlike in the Chambon episode, there was no proven physical risk — Sousa Mendes was never subjected to violence, even after his return to Portugal — and most of us, if asked the question in these terms, would answer sincerely that we are prepared to sacrifice our careers to save a multitude of human lives.

But the problem has never been posed in these terms, except retroactively, and that is why so few people intervene in such circumstances. Or, to put it more accurately

more accurately, the problem does arise in these terms, but it takes a real intellectual and psychological effort to have the courage to pose it in this way.

First of all, obedience, and even more so, respect for the word given. The data are authentic values, especially in government, and it is difficult to blame those who stuck to commitments they had made and wished to honor—unless one is convinced that one would have acted differently oneself.

Another factor to consider, which Milgram skillfully exploited, is the *discharge of responsibility*. Those responsible for the situation of refugees are those who issued Circular 14, not those responsible for implementing it, and it takes a real leap of imagination to convince oneself that one is jointly responsible for a circular issued by a hierarchical authority to which one has pledged [obedience \[126\]](#).

Especially since – and this is perhaps the most important aspect of the Sousa Mendes case – obedience to orders had no visible or measurable consequences in this instance. In this sense, the inaction of all the civil servants who did nothing in the first weeks of the German occupation cannot be compared to that of civil servants who, in other circumstances, did not intervene.

By obeying orders, Eichmann and Bousquet knew full well, whatever they may have said, that they were participating in a criminal enterprise. It would be unfair to say the same of the civil



servants who did not issue visas in June 1940. The prospects were undoubtedly bleak for most refugees, particularly Jews, but they were not under direct threat of death, and no one at that time could have imagined what the "Final Solution" would be.

[127].

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Faced with this situation, doing nothing is the wisest course of action, and those who did nothing were, in Romain Gary's sense, right.

In such circumstances, doing nothing is not the opposite of doing something. Sousa Mendes did not have the choice between doing something and doing nothing. Doing something requires considerable intellectual effort, the development of independent thinking, where fear plays no part or

only a marginal role, compared to what is involved in abstaining.

Doing something first requires confronting the suffering of all these refugees, psychological suffering for oneself, which can be avoided, as in Elaine's experience, by closing the door on them and thus protecting oneself from their presence. Not having to face the problem is a psychologically satisfying solution that demonstrates a form of mental balance.

Taking action also means stepping outside the protective framework of the law, which not only involves taking risks with one's own career—which is no small matter when one has children to feed, as in

Sousa Mendes' case—but also stepping outside *the* psychological *framework* created by administrative rules, which provide reassurance for the [mind](#) .

In this sense, Sousa Mendes' situation is not comparable to the situations of non-intervention analyzed by American authors such as Bibb Latané and John Darley, in the wake of the debate surrounding the Kitty Genovese case. This young woman, who was attacked in a New York neighborhood in 1964, called for help for over half an hour before she was killed, and none of the thirty-eight people who heard her cries [intervened](#)

However, Sousa Mendes' situation is significantly different. The spectators of Kitty Genovese's murder were faced with a genuine fork in the road, which they did not invent but which preceded their reflection. The prior existence of this fork is also endorsed by the law, which punishes the offense of failure to assist a person in danger, i.e., people who made the wrong choice between two possible options.

On the other hand, Sousa Mendes has no choice. Not only does he not commit a crime by refusing to issue visas to applicants who do not meet the conditions of Circular 14, but he commits a crime by issuing them. The decisions of a civil servant can only be made within the legal framework, and he does not have to choose between staying within that framework or leaving it.

Regardless of the strict legality, one can certainly attempt to draw a comparison with the Genovese case by pointing out that

refugees are seeking help from the embassy, directly or indirectly, by simply applying for a visa. But the comparison does not hold up. Kitty Genovese was the victim of an assault in real time, which required immediate assistance, and the same is true of the other examples analyzed by Bibb Latané and John Darley. The refugees at the consulates in Bordeaux and Bayonne were not in immediate danger; they were under threat of a virtual attack, which, for some, would have materialized several years later.

We can praise Sousa Mendes' ability, with the help of Rabbi Kruger, to use his imagination, but we are here in the context of a plausible fiction, not a real danger. Sousa Mendes did not respond to a choice presented by a fork in the road; *he created a fork* that did not exist as such and that few diplomats at the [time \[130\]](#), [placed](#) in identical circumstances, would have thought of.

Within Sousa Mendes' family and professional environment, this bifurcation does not exist. But his intervention in reality consists of *inventing a new framework* for his thinking and action, a framework within which this bifurcation arises. In doing so, he does not find a solution, but invents a problem that did not exist before his reflection.

\*

For a young civil servant like me, and even though the École normale encouraged students to keep carefully away from any

political [activity \[131\]](#), attempting to break out of the framework in which I lived, a framework that was at once material, intellectual, and psychological, presented significant difficulties.

Breaking out of this framework means, first of all, taking the risk of being expelled from the École normale, and thus putting an end to what had long been my family's dream. Given the energy I put into getting into this institution, I cannot cheerfully accept the prospect of leaving it and disappointing my loved ones.

What's more, it's not just exclusion that I risk, but losing any chance of remaining in the civil service and therefore of having the stable job I aspire to after

years of difficult studies, and which will enable me to support the family I hope to start one day.

Such considerations seem absurd with the benefit of hindsight, and it is likely that, for most of my comrades as well as myself, they played a secondary role compared to physical fear, which was more than enough to excuse our lack of mobilization and our preference to continue working.

In any case, few of us committed ourselves, at least before February 1943, and took the risk, as Sousa Mendes deservedly did, of stepping outside the legal and psychological framework in which we were confined, inventing from scratch a problem that did not exist.

## CHAPTER III

### THE LACK OF CREATIVITY

So it is not only physical fear that we must rid ourselves of if we want to break free from all the inner ties that hold us back and prevent us from protesting, but also that which imprisons our thoughts in restrictive frameworks, which are all the more oppressive because they are invisible and not perceived as such.

That the ability to resist requires breaking free from existing frameworks is illustrated by the life of Milena Jesenska, the Czech journalist who became famous for her correspondence with Kafka, but who also deserves to be remembered for other reasons, linked to her attitude during the Second World War.

Milena Jesenska may not have saved as many lives as Sousa Mendes, but throughout her life, like the members of the White Rose, she embodied the need for intellectuals not to remain confined to books but to take the risk of engaging with history.

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Much of what we know about Milena Jesenska's life, especially her final years, comes from the testimony of Margarete Buber-Neumann,

who accompanied her until her death and dedicated a book to her, *Milena*.

Born in 1896, Milena Jesenska was the daughter of a prominent Prague surgeon, Dr. Jesenski. She lost her mother at the age of thirteen. She attended Minerva High School in Prague. From an early age, she liked to stand out. With two of her friends, she enjoyed shocking the Prague bourgeoisie with her clothes and behavior, to the point that her father eventually had her committed to a mental institution for a time.

After beginning medical studies, she launched her career in journalism in 1920, both in Vienna, where she contributed to the Czech newspaper *Tribuna*, and in Prague, where she wrote for several magazines before becoming editor of the cultural magazine *Přítomnost*. At the same time, she worked as a translator.

Several men would have a significant impact on her life. She first married a translator, Ernst Pollak, who took her to live in Vienna, then the architect Jaromir Krejcar. But the man who would mean the most to her, and with whom she would maintain a famous correspondence despite having met him only a few times, was undoubtedly Franz Kafka.

\*

It was in 1919, apparently in Vienna, that Milena read Kafka's first texts. Impressed by the writer's genius, she decided to translate him

into Czech and wrote to him to express her admiration and get to know him. She then met him briefly in a café when she was twenty-three and Kafka was thirty-four.

On Kafka's initiative, who wanted to find out how the young woman was doing, a correspondence began between them the following year, at first conventional, then increasingly intimate and passionate. Kafka, who was suffering from a serious lung condition, was undergoing treatment in Merano and hesitated to visit Milena, fearing the fatigue of the journey.

Finally, they met in Vienna for a few days, from June 29 to July 4, 1920. Their first relationship was intense, but their passion quickly revealed their difficulty in living together. Milena was married to Ernst Pollak, whom she could not bring herself to leave, and Kafka did not feel capable, despite his love for Milena, of committing to a long-term relationship with her.

They probably saw each other one last time in Gmünd, on the border between Austria and Czechoslovakia. They continued to write to each other intermittently, then stopped at Kafka's request. He died in 1924, unable to bear the violence of a relationship that confronted him with his guilt and threatened to drive him away from what mattered most to him: writing.

\*

Milena was also a writer, and her entire literary output was a



defense of freedom of thought and a fight against totalitarianism. But she was not content with that, and as fascism swept across Europe, she gradually became involved in active resistance. She did so initially within the Communist Party, of which she was a member for a time, but she did not feel comfortable there and distanced herself from it.

After the German invasion of Czechoslovakia, she redoubled her efforts against the occupiers, both in the newspapers she contributed to and in the leaflets she distributed. She joined an underground network dedicated to helping Jews cross the Polish border and took in fugitives in her apartment. Taking few precautions in her resistance activities, she was eventually arrested by the Gestapo and deported to Ravensbrück.

In this camp reserved for women, she met Margarete Buber-Neumann. The wife of Heinz Neumann—both communist activists—she had been deported to Siberia for two years before being handed over by the to the Germans. As such, she was a privileged witness to the prison systems of totalitarian regimes and spoke out about them after the war, drawing the wrath of French communists, who were outraged that anyone could draw comparisons between Nazi camps and those of the USSR. It is thanks to Margarete Buber-Neumann's friendship that we know what Milena's last years were like before she died in Ravensbrück. To keep a promise they had made to each other to

write a book about their imprisonment and to preserve the memory  
of young young woman, Margarete Buber-Neumann

dedicated dedicated a

book after her release.

In this book, which they should have written together, Margarete  
Buber-Neumann, aware that her friend had saved her life, wrote  
something that seems paradoxical, to say the least, when one  
considers  
the conditions in which they were held: "I thank fate for sending me to  
Ravensbrück and thus allowing me to meet [Milena](#) "

\*

Where could such a feeling of gratitude come from? What struck

Margarete Buber-Neumann about Milena Jesenska was the impression

of freedom that the young woman exuded, right from their first meeting, when Milena, who had heard about Margarete and her misadventures, introduced herself to her:

It was during the "new arrivals" walk that Milena came up to me. [...] She introduced herself, saying, "Milena from Prague." Her hometown was more important to her than her last name. I will never forget the gesture she made to greet me that first time, the strength and grace that accompanied it [133].

And the rest of the story of Margarete and Milena's encounter confirms the young woman's ability to behave freely in all circumstances:

We stood on the narrow path, preventing others from moving forward and blocking the comings and goings of the dense mass of inmates. Overcome with anger, they tried to push us forward with furious gestures, so I had only one thing in mind: to end these greetings as quickly as possible and resume my place in the circle at the prescribed pace. Over the years I had spent in detention, I had learned to adapt to the laws governing the movements of these herds of prisoners. But Milena was completely devoid of such a faculty. [...] Without being in the least disturbed by the recriminations of the crowd surrounding us, she savored the event in complete tranquility. At first, her carefree attitude infuriated me, but then it began to fascinate me. I had before me a personality that had not been broken, a free being

among the humiliated [134].

Everything about Milena seems marked by this desire to remain free, which impresses her fellow inmates to such an extent that she is not subjected to the rejection traditionally suffered by those who try to express their difference in a world where standing out is frowned upon:

In fact, Milena should have been the target of constant attacks in the camp; the vast majority of inmates, in their desire to fit in, ended up collaborating with those who enslaved them. As a general rule, prominent personalities who resisted coercion and refused to submit were rejected—if not persecuted. Perhaps this attitude was the product of a kind of guilt; unconsciously, people knew that they had sunk into disgrace. They took revenge on those who remained unshaken.

But not against Milena. She was a remarkable exception. She was persecuted by the communist leaders solely for political reasons. There was something quite provocative about Milena's manner; the way she spoke, moved, held her head; every gesture she made said, "I am a free person."

Milena Jesenská exercised this freedom in many areas of camp life.

For example, she refused, at the risk of her life, to submit to the discipline of the guards and managed to retain

a degree of autonomy. Not "in accordance with camp order

[136]," this autonomy, which was not without risk in a place like Ravensbrück, stemmed from her ability to live by rejecting the existing framework:

I remember an evening call in the spring. [...] Milena had completely forgotten about the call, the concentration camp; perhaps she had escaped in her dreams to some park in the suburbs of Prague, among the crocuses blooming on the lawns. Suddenly, she began to whistle a little tune to herself... An explosion of anger shook the communists around her! Milena noted bitterly: "They have such an easy life ; they were born with the soul of

prisoners, they have discipline ingrained in their bodies [137]!"

In fact, a double framework had been established in the concentration camp. The rigid framework imposed by the Nazis was overlaid by another, less visible one imposed by the communists. But Milena refused to bow to either, especially when she was asked to choose between joining the communist group and her friendship with Margarete:

Milena's friendship for me eventually went too far for the communists [...] (who) gave Milena a kind of ultimatum: she had to choose between her membership of the Czech community in Ravensbrück and her friendship with the German Buber-Neumann. Milena made a choice whose consequences she understood immediately. She , was subsequently subjected to

the same fanatical hatred that the communists felt for me [138].

Milena decided to use her ability to live outside the box to help her fellow prisoners, working tirelessly to protect them from the guards' arbitrary cruelty and save them from death as the camp gradually turned into an extermination camp. She also used this ability to help her friend.

Milena's behavior is not only characterized by an exceptional ability to free herself from administrative constraints or the usual frameworks of thought. Her activity in Ravensbrück, which is at the same time a means of survival, has a dimension of a different order, which is not only a rejection of what exists and is imposed on us as a rule, but a form of *creation*.

This creative side had already manifested itself in her decision to support Margarete Buber-Neumann against the communists in the camp. It continued to express itself in their relationship, particularly when Margarete was thrown into solitary confinement after breaking the rules and had no contact with the outside world for several days.

Milena decided to take every risk to ensure that her friend would not be abandoned to her fate. Defying the rules, she went directly to the Gestapo officer in charge of the camp, determined to talk to him about Margarete:

For three weeks, she waited in vain for me to return from the bunker. Every day reinforced her fear that I would be left there to die. So she made a heroic decision. She asked for an audience with Ramdor, the Gestapo man, throwing herself straight into the lion's den. Ramdor received her in his office. He was probably expecting her to come and report someone. Unfortunately, that was the kind of thing that happened in the camp. "I would like to talk to you about my friend Grete Buber. She is in the bunker," Milena began. Any other prisoner would have found it very difficult to finish this sentence without Ramdor administering at least one slap. But the Gestapo man was clearly under her spell

from the outset [139].

In an attempt to save her friend, Milena began to speak in her defense. She offered to tell the Gestapo man what was happening in the prison infirmary, where prisoners were executed and then stripped of their valuables, in exchange for a promise that Margarete would be

released from the cell. And, against all expectations, Ramdor had the doctor responsible for these misdeeds arrested, along with his mistress:

But what would have happened to Milena if Ramdor had covered for Dr. Rosenthal? On the , she would have been liquidated without delay. She knew it, and yet she dared to take this step [140].

A few months later, the same Ramdor approached Milena and asked her to spy on a female prisoner. When she refused, agreeing instead to take risks once again, he replied: "All the same, you're a good person, you'll be a good ' ' [141]!"

\*

How can we describe this as a creative activity? Milena's attitude is characterized, once again, by her rejection of existing frameworks, which are frameworks for both thought and action. The form of freedom she embodies stems from the fact that she, like Sousa Mendes and the members of the White Rose, refuses to be imprisoned by the mental constraints imposed on her by both the communists and the camp administration.

But this liberation from frameworks is not only negative, it also opens up possibilities in that it reveals new avenues for thought and action, or, if you will, bifurcations that were not apparent before. Deciding to put one's own life on the line to save a friend is not responding to a choice, because that choice does not exist prior to the

decision, which constitutes it after the fact.

If we can thus speak of a form of creation in Milena's case, it is because she invents a form of action—denouncing her own accomplices to a Nazi official—that has no model or precedent. In this sense, she creates something that is both consistent with her personality and with the possibilities offered by the context, and that undoubtedly only she could have achieved.

Nor was there any precedent to inspire Cordier, Gary, and their comrades when they decided to find a way to get to England, André Trocmé mobilized an entire village to save Jewish children, Hans and Sophie Scholl distributed leaflets at the university, or Sousa Mendes undertook to issue visas to anyone who asked him for one.

In this sense, these acts of opposition—whether carried out by heroes or righteous individuals—are not limited to resistance in the sense of saying no. They involve forging a new path that did not exist before it was invented and which, in hindsight, reveals that the subject did in fact have a choice, even if it was invisible.

But this opening up of possibilities can lead nowhere if the subject is not prepared to break with themselves and *step outside the framework they have created for themselves*. This abandonment most often takes the form of a vital risk, but above all it implies being able to lose something of who we are and what we hold dear. This creation is therefore not only the invention of an action without a model, it is also, in part, a reinvention of oneself.



I have sometimes wondered what Milena owed, in her ability to invent new paths in the face of extremes, to the writer she had been in love with in Prague many years earlier, and to

the world she had frequented and translated, to the point of eventually inhabiting it. Is it not possible that some of the creative energy of the author of *The Trial* and *The Castle* had passed into her forever, giving her, fifteen years after his death, the strength to resist the world he had first described?

More than courage in the face of fear and the loss of acquired advantages, it is this freedom to chart a unique path against imposed frameworks, a freedom that is a form of creation, that I undoubtedly miss the most during my time at the École normale supérieure, a freedom that others around me, albeit few, manage to find.

How can I not mention here the names of those I meet every day at the École without having the courage to follow them—though it is true that I am unaware of their secret activities—such as Louis Bacquier, Marcel Boiteux, Henri Cabannes, Jean Delvert, and Georges Demerson? Or Jean-Pierre Dannaud, who left the École once, only to be tracked down in the provinces by Stéphane Piobetta, the "caiman," at the request of the director, before the two decided, [oncetogether](#) and for all, to return ?

Once again, my hesitations do not concern my feelings toward the occupiers and the Vichy regime, but rather my ability to act on this hostility. They concern the *transition* from this hostility to effective action, insofar as fear, in its various forms, is enough to counterbalance my animosity and prevent me from imagining original

actions, giving me the impression that there is nothing to be done.

It is likely that my father experienced a similar conflict between the desire to act and fear, since he took a long time to take the initiative, faithful to a wait-and-see attitude that is, as we have seen, a hallmark of our family. It is true that he did eventually take action, since, after spending a year in Calais with his family, on his return from the University of Aix, he decided in the spring of 1943, with three of his friends, the crystal finally broken, to join the Resistance.

# THE TURNING POINT

# CHAPTER ONE

## OF HIMSELF

Many factors therefore play a role in the decision to take action, and so far I have only outlined a general setting in which powerful opposing forces collide and, as far as I am concerned, two opposing guiding principles clearly dominate. The first is my hostility towards the Vichy regime, and even more so towards Nazism, and my sense of solidarity with the victims. The second is a form of apathy, which stems from my fear of physical danger, my desire not to lose hard-won advantages, and my lack of inventiveness when it comes to thinking outside the box.

To try to understand what motivates my attitude, after analyzing the conflicting forces that divide me, as they do most of my comrades, I must now get as close as possible to *the tipping point*, that is, the precise moment when the decision takes shape and the lines of my inner personality—what I have called my potential personality—are revealed.

To continue reflecting on this conflictual model, I will now step outside the narrow historical framework in which I have remained until now to examine three cases of mass murder that present similarities, but also differences, with the Second World War, namely

Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda. The aim is not to ask how I would have behaved in such circumstances, since I have set myself a clear historical limit, but to apply the proposed model to other contexts that may shed new light on the decision-making process.

\*

Compared to what happened in France and in certain occupied countries

, the Cambodian genocide has a distinctive feature concerning the *margins of maneuver*, i.e., the possibilities for action available to a subject immersed in a situation of extreme violence. This concept, theorized in particular by Harald [Welzer \[143\]](#), was implicit in Browning's analysis of the situations he described, which showed that, contrary to conventional wisdom, German police officers could refuse to become murderers without incurring serious consequences.

The Cambodian genocide is an interesting comparison because the scope for various forms of resistance was extremely limited. Any opposition to the orders of the Angkar—the mysterious communist organization that controlled the country from April 17, 1975—was immediately punished by death, whether that opposition came from a civilian or a member of the organization.

In this sense, the decisions faced by some individuals who nevertheless attempted to resist were made in a context of mortal danger. And the most profound elements underlying the decision-making process at the final moment emerge more clearly in this extreme situation, where the slightest deviation from the law is punishable by death.

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The extent of the terror inflicted by the Khmer Rouge can be gauged from the testimony of one of the most famous survivors of the

genocide, the painter Vann Nath.

Born in Battambang, Vann Nath spent his childhood and adolescence there and became a monk in a Buddhist temple, where he spent several years, the traditional destiny of older boys in Khmer families. He then became a sign painter, a profession he was practicing when the Khmer Rouge seized power.

Vann Nath then suffered the fate of hundreds of thousands of Cambodians, being sent to the countryside with his family to cultivate the fields and harvest rice. He remained there until December 1977, when he was arrested without charge,



then tortured and transported by truck to Phnom Penh.

He ended up in Tuol Sleng—also known as S-21—a former high school that had been turned into a torture and extermination center for Khmer Rouge officials. All prisoners were condemned to death, but just as he was about to be executed, Vann Nath was offered a deal by Duch, the director of S-21: in exchange for his life, he would paint portraits of Pol Pot.

Saved from execution, he was released in January 1979, one year after his incarceration, when the Vietnamese entered Phnom Penh. One of only seven survivors of the approximately 17,000 prisoners at S-21, he continued to bear witness to his experience of the Cambodian genocide through his writings, speeches, and, above all, his paintings until his death in September 2011.

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The terrifying picture that Vann Nath painted, along with others, of the Khmer Rouge regime shows that there was little room for maneuver and that the possibilities for disobeying orders were, unlike in Germany, very limited, if not non-existent.

In his film about the extermination *center*—*S-21, the Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*—Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh filmed several encounters between the painter and some of his former jailers, who met for the first time in front of the camera and discussed their shared

experiences.

Vann Nath agreed to relive the traumatic experience of meeting his tormentors in the hope of better understanding how these "normal" men could have turned into monsters and what processes led them to such dehumanization. He also wants to know what happened to the children who were imprisoned at the same time as their parents, from whom he has had no news since.

During the interviews, as he talks with his former jailers about the unbelievable confessions extracted from prisoners before their execution—all were forced to admit that they worked for the CIA, the KGB, or the Vietnamese—Vann Nath struggles to understand

how the guards could have believed such fantastical stories, clearly dictated by suffering and fear.

Rithy Panh's film is therefore an exceptional document, all the more so because the people in question speak freely (they are no longer liable to prosecution), bringing us closer to the point where subjects—who, like Browning's policemen, had no apparent predisposition to do so—tip over into mass murder.

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While these men acknowledge some of their [crimes \[144\]](#), their reluctance to speak out and show guilt also stems from the fact that they consider themselves, like Vann Nath and all those murdered at S-21, to be victims of the Khmer Rouge.

This argument is a variation on the defense put forward by many Nazi criminals, starting with Eichmann during his trial in Jerusalem, who justified their actions by claiming that they were obliged to obey orders and therefore considered themselves absolved of all responsibility. But in the case of Cambodia, this submission to authority was reinforced by the direct threat under which the population lived, who were thus denied any possibility of choice.

This lack of choice was evident at S-21. This extermination center, reserved mainly for former Khmer Rouge members, was used to kill anyone considered a traitor to the cause after extracting detailed

confessions from them. It was used in particular to imprison, before executing them, the followers of a disgraced Kampuchean leader, So Phim.

The importance of internal purges, which became increasingly frequent as the regime panicked in the face of economic collapse and the threat of military defeat at the hands of the Vietnamese, blurred the line between executioners and victims. The prisoners at S-21 were often former executioners themselves, and their presence reminded the jailers of the risk they ran if they rebelled. To distance oneself in any way from what was happening at S-21 meant crossing over to the other side, being imprisoned and put to death.

happening at S-21 meant crossing over to the other side, being imprisoned and put to death.

It is this lack of choice that former guards Houy and Ein try to explain to Vann Nath in a sequence from Rithy Panh's film, where they are confronted by their victim:

Vann Nath: You who worked at Tuol Sleng, like Houy, Ein, and the rest of you, do you consider yourselves victims? I want your opinion.

Houy: This story... I was saying... we're like people who've had an accident. That's what I mean... Vann Nath: Wait, just one word. Do you consider yourselves victims, you who worked here?

Ein: In a word: all victims. Without exception.

Vann Nath: If those who worked here are victims, what about prisoners like me? Ein: Victims in a second . Here, if you didn't obey, you were dead, there was no escape. I already explained that to you [\[145\]](#).

Continuing the conversation with Vann Nath, the former Khmer Rouge members remind him of what they risked by disobeying, mentioning all their comrades who, despite being guards at S-21, were victims of purges and executed:

Vann Nath: If you are victims, what are the executed prisoners?

Houy: I mean... There were a lot of my guys. Why didn't they die... uh, why didn't they survive? Almost all of them are dead. Out of a hundred, only thirty are left! All of them, even the guards are dead! You don't believe me? That's why I was terrified [\[146\]](#).

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Was there really no room for maneuver at S-21, where even the guards considered themselves victims and claimed they had no

choice? An episode recounted by Vann Nath in his autobiography prompts us to ask this question of bifurcation as precisely as possible.

Among the artists imprisoned at S-21 who owed their salvation to their professional activity was another painter, Bou Meng. One day, he disappeared and remained absent for a week before reappearing in chains, his body covered with wounds:

What was he guilty of to be tortured like this? For more than a days, I had imagined him with his family, but instead he was suffering martyrdom [\[147\]](#).

The reasons why Bou Meng displeased Duch are unclear, but no reason is necessary at S-21 to torture or kill. He is forced by Duch to apologize to Vann Nath, and

kicked in the head for failing to do so in the first person. Duch reproached him for being unable to distinguish between superiors and subordinates and for often addressing Vann Nath in incorrect terms. He then suggested to his companions that they kill him:

"So, guys, what do you think of Meng?" Duch asks us. "In my opinion, he's no longer of any use to us. He's too deceitful and arrogant. [...] It would be better to use him as fertilizer. What do you think?"

Duch bursts out laughing cruelly, then asks:

"Is that okay with you?"

No one answers. I glance at the other two, hoping they'll say something. But they continue to stare at the floor. I'm so tense that I can hardly breathe, almost . No one dares to

express an opinion. But Duch insists and repeats the question [148].

Unlike the members of the 101<sup>st</sup> German police battalion, the danger for Vann Nath was direct and immediate. If he displeased Duch—and it was impossible to know what pleased or displeased him in a world ruled by complete arbitrariness, as Bou Meng's disgrace showed—he ran the risk of being put to death immediately.

The safest course of action for his own safety was therefore to agree to Duch's proposal, or at least, like his companions, to remain cautiously silent. But that was not the choice he made:

Unable to endure the tension any longer, I decided to break the poisonous atmosphere and take the risk of coming to the rescue of a friend.

"Forgive me, Brother, but I would like to ask you to be tolerant with Meng this time. He is a bit snobbish, it's true, but he will surely change now that he has been punished. I beg you, Brother, forgive him this time. And if he does not recognize his mistake, you can

reconsider your decision [149]. "

After consulting with Vann Nath's companions, Duch accepted his proposal, but with three conditions: Bou Meng would not be allowed to smoke, he could not move more than five squares away from his

canvas on the floor, and he would be chained by the ankles. But above all, Vann Nath would be responsible for ensuring that these conditions were respected and would be punished in Bou Meng's place if he failed to do so:

I accept, and Duch leaves the room with his bodyguards. As it is already one o'clock in the morning, I go back to bed, overwhelmed by fear.

The next morning, my heart is still filled with the memory of the previous day', but I am relieved to have been able to save the life of a friend [\[150\]](#).



The example of the Cambodian genocide and the mirror-image cases of Vann Nath and the guards show the need to assess the transition to resistance behavior in each specific context. It is likely that Houy and his companions, had they shown the slightest reluctance to obey their superiors' orders, would also have been executed.

This is not to make excuses for them, but to highlight Vann Nath's intervention in saving Bou Meng's life. He is risking nothing less than his own life with the words he utters. What he risked in a second, in a kind of gamble involving his life and that of his companion, was therefore considerable and can only be assessed in the specific context of the Khmer Rouge regime and the concrete communication situation in which the painter found himself.

It is difficult to know what triggered Vann Nath's decision to defend Bou Meng. That he empathized with this other victim, who resembled him and was about to be put to death, is not enough to explain his actions. Placed in the same situation, the other artists could only feel empathy for one another.

Where did Vann Nath find the strength to take this step, which, at a major crossroads in his life—the possibility, like Milena, of saving a friend's life—led him to choose heroism? The first hypothesis, the most obvious even if it does not resolve everything, is that he found it

within himself, that is, at the core of his personality.

In an attempt to go beyond empathy-based analysis, which he feels is insufficient, Terestchenko put forward an additional hypothesis.

After mentioning a number of qualities that he believes apply equally to heroes and the Righteous, such as "strength of character," "inner reserve," and "nobility of spirit," he proposes the notion of "presence of mind":

These character traits define what I call, for lack of a better term, "presence to oneself," as opposed to the absence of self found in the "rag doll" or "man in a case" described by Chekhov. And this distinction seems to me to say much more than the opposition between selfishness and altruism. It is characteristic of a self that is strongly structured by a

vigorous inner moral "framework," animated by powerful personal convictions, to be able to oppose the resistance of its inalienable freedom, despite fear, deprivation, anxiety, risk, and also consideration of the well-understood interest, to the oppression that transforms the

greatest number into an enslaved mass [\[151\]](#).

For Terestchenko, thinking about presence to oneself means not limiting the self to what we perceive through a superficial approach, but assuming another, more essential entity within us, which he calls the "self":

This is only possible if, ultimately, the being does not identify with this egocentric definition of the self, if the "self" to which it remains present cannot be reduced to what we call the "ego," whose identity is more "relational" than substantial and is defined by this

borrowed identity, this empty identity, which is the social image of the self [\[152\]](#).

It is this deep identity, hidden by the social image and its mirages, which, according to Terestchenko, would reveal itself and take over in certain subjects confronted with a situation they feel is psychologically unbearable, and then forced by an inner demand to intervene, sometimes at the risk of their lives.

It should be noted that this "self," which cannot be reduced to the ego to which only others have access in everyday life, is similar to one of the forms of potential personality that I have attempted to elucidate. But it is only one of these forms, insofar as other forms of personality, negative or more neutral, can also be exposed when subjects experience extreme situations.

This presence to oneself, which confers "inalienable freedom" on the subject, means that the subject needs no one else to think and act. The subject is his own reference point, the interlocutor with whom he

can exchange ideas, his companion in thought. He discovers that he is the repository of an inner strength that enables him to overcome obstacles and invent a personal path. And it is this strength that helps them, at the ultimate moment when they face death, to overcome the "barriers of [fear](#) " [153].

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In this general avoidance that characterizes the behavior of our generation, can I identify circumstances that might cause me to step outside myself and compel me to get involved?

One such circumstance is the situation, similar to that of Vann Nath recounts, where we encounter the tangible spectacle of the suffering of others. As protected as we were from the violence of war at the École Normale Supérieure, we were confronted daily, as soon as we left the school, with unbearable scenes, starting with the persecution of Jews. Jean-Toussaint Desanti recounted how the sight of a roundup of Jewish adults and children near the École Normale was enough to push him into the [Resistance](#) [154].

Faced with such shocking situations, I too would like to find within myself the courage to act. Do I lack that mysterious presence of mind that Terestchenko talks about? Am I devoid of that secret core, deep within oneself, where certain privileged individuals draw the energy that would allow me, if I had access to it, to transform my indignation into concrete action?

However, it must be acknowledged that the real catalyst for many young people of my generation was not the scenes of violence we witnessed in the streets, nor even the Vel d'Hiv roundup, but a piece of legislation that would turn all our lives upside down and lead many of us, including my father, to join the Resistance: the decree of February 1943 establishing the STO [[155](#)].

## CHAPTER II

### OF OTHERS

Presence to oneself is a concept that can help us understand how certain individuals take the step of staking their existence on a single gesture or a whole set of attitudes. It seems to me to be in line with the inner compulsion I mentioned earlier, both in the case of heroes and the Righteous, which places them in a situation where they cannot do otherwise, to the point where they do not even ask themselves whether they could behave differently.

What presence to oneself demonstrates is that these beings would feel, if they did not act in this way, that they were dissociated from themselves and would experience unbearable suffering. In this way, the conflict between fear—which is not absent—and the necessity to act is resolved in favor of the latter, in order to prevent too great an inner conflict from arising within them.

But is this explanation sufficient? My feeling is that the decision to commit—even if it does not appear to the conscious mind as a decision, but as an unformulable obviousness—cannot be understood solely by analyzing the intrinsic strength of the person, and that it is also important to take into account the dimension of the Other, meaning both the other subjects present during the decision-making

process and that part of ourselves that is the Other, in whose gaze we exist.

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The example I would like to refer to here to analyze this dimension of the Other at the heart of the tipping point—an example that once again highlights the fleeting moment of the act itself—concerns the Bosnian War and one of the leading figures of the siege of Sarajevo, General Jovan Divjak.

Divjak was born in Belgrade into a Serbian family, but had ties to Bosnia through his father, who was from Krajina. During his childhood, his family lived alternately in Bosnia and Serbia. After his parents' divorce, he left with his mother and sister for Vojvodina, a province in northern Serbia.

His family's poverty, which meant they couldn't afford to send him to university, led the young Divjak to enroll in the Military Academy in Belgrade, where tuition was free. After graduating in 1959, he joined Tito's guard battalion, then his personal guard. Like many Yugoslavs, he had great admiration for Tito.

In 1966, after a six-month stay in France, he was appointed commander of the Military Academy in Sarajevo, a city where cultural communities coexisted harmoniously. The city reached a kind of peak with the 1984 Olympic Games, which Divjak described as "the golden

age of [Sarajevo](#) ". A few years later, the breakup of Yugoslavia brought this harmony to an abrupt end.

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Divjak was in Sarajevo when war broke out on April 6, 1992, with the international community recognizing Bosnia's independence. On April 8, the Bosnian authorities decided to reorganize the Territorial Defense Force—a group of reservists defending the country alongside the Yugoslav army, which had fallen into Serbian hands—which three months later became the Armija, the army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This separation between the two armies, made necessary by Bosnia's independence, forced the military to decide which side they wanted to continue serving. Divjak, however, was of Serbian "origin."

Divjak recounted the scene in which he was summoned to choose sides in terms that show how much he knew at that moment that his life would be turned upside down in one direction or another depending on the decision he was asked to make, and that this was due

to the acceleration of history, with only a few hours to think about it.

This scene takes place on April 8, 1992, shortly after the start of the siege of Sarajevo. Divjak is contacted by a Croatian official from the newly formed Bosnian army, who



offers him the opportunity to join them:

"Bosnia and Herzegovina has gained its independence and is going through historic times, he told me. I saw Izetbegovic. The presidency must defend the country against attacks by SDS extremists and wants a multinational command. Hasan Efendic, the chief of staff, is Muslim, I am Croatian. We are offering you the position of deputy commander, working alongside us. I would like you to join us. Think about it."

I accepted immediately and took up my duties that same [evening \[157\]](#)...

Although Divjak did not hesitate to accept the offer, he nevertheless found himself at a crossroads that would largely determine his future life, as evidenced by the presence in the same office of another military officer of Serbian origin, Colonel Stojan Ilic, who had been living in Sarajevo for twenty years, almost as long as Divjak, and who also had a choice to make:

Stojan Ilic, meanwhile, was faced with a real dilemma. His mother lived in a village in southern Serbia, where they had a small plot of land. She begged him over the phone to come and join her. I tried to convince Stojan that his place was with us in Sarajevo, where he had made his home and where his children went to school... I felt great sorrow for this torn man whom I saw crying. While listening to me, he paced back and forth in the office. He was like a

caged lion. He finally left Sarajevo [\[158\]](#).

And Ilic is not the only Serbian officer to hesitate in the face of the seriousness of the choice, probably final, that he is faced with:

I wish Stojan and the other officers had had more time to think. But the commander-in-chief had given them only a few hours to sign their enlistment papers. At headquarters, there were whispers that the enemy was already infiltrating our territorial defense forces. In this incredibly tense atmosphere, around 30 Serbian officers were seething with rage at not having been invited to the first meeting of the new general staff. They thought we were suspicious of them simply because they were Serbs, and they were exasperated. I also tried to convince them that we had to fight together for Bosnia-Herzegovina, and to preserve the

harmony of our city. But they resigned the next day [\[159\]](#).

And these officers torn between the two sides also had to contend with all forms of pressure, some violent, some less so, exerted by the Serbs on those who remained in Sarajevo:

Another senior officer, Mile Jovicic, initially stayed with us, but returned his uniform after four days, in tears. He was at the end of his tether, harassed and threatened over the phone by officers from the Lukavica barracks [160].

\*

The way Divjak downplays his commitment to the Bosnian army by presenting it as natural should not obscure the courage that such a choice implies. Few "Serbian" soldiers, and none at this level, remained in Sarajevo during the siege, and one can understand the reasons why they made this decision.

By staying in Sarajevo, Divjak was first and foremost putting himself at physical risk. considerable. He effectively becomes a living target for the enemy army, particularly for snipers who shoot at the city's inhabitants from the hills overlooking it.

But he also risks cutting himself off from many of his friends, with no guarantee that he will ever be accepted in a country that is increasingly distancing itself from its stated ideals and favoring criteria of "ethnic" belonging.

And experience will justify the fears he may have had in refusing to leave the city. As "inter-ethnic" tensions grow and a "Muslim" army is established, Divjak finds himself increasingly marginalized within the Bosnian army and is finally forced to resign [161].

What were the reasons that led Divjak to remain in Sarajevo? Like Gary, Martha Trocmé, and many other characters in this book, Divjak

always put his commitment into perspective, claiming that he had no choice. This is what set him apart from his office colleague, Stojan Ilic, who decided to join the Serbian army:

The big difference was that his roots were in Serbia. Mine are in Bosnia, where I spent my early childhood. I am Serbian, but I have always considered this a personal matter, something private. My whole life was in Sarajevo: my family, my friends, my neighborhood. I have a Muslim stepdaughter and another who is Croatian. What would I have done in Serbia, where I had no property and no friends? I might as well have chosen Alaska

[162]!

At other times, however, Divjak does not refer to cultural arguments, but to a political choice, namely that he is committed to defending a certain idea of democracy and multiculturalism:

In 1992, I realized that the most important thing was to be a citizen of Bosnia and Herzegovina. And I always hated it when people tried to claim me as one of their own. To all the curious people who wanted to meet the "Serb" from the Armija, I replied that I was Bosnian. Bosnian and an earthling, since I belong to planet Earth. I even told a journalist once that I was Jewish! In short, nationalities and ethnic groups are too narrow concepts in which I feel constrained. During the 1990 census, a citizen of Sarajevo registered as an Eskimo to express his frustration with labels and technical . Perhaps it is a form of arrogance on my

part, but I feel like a citizen of the world [163].

If we want to gain a deeper understanding of the reasons that led Divjak to become the highest-ranking Serbian military officer to choose to remain in Sarajevo, we must look beyond his strength of character or his presence of mind and also take into account what made this conflict unique, namely its media coverage.

This difference concerns first and foremost the conflict itself, which received infinitely more media coverage than other similar events in the past. The Bosnian War was, in part, a war of images, a war that had to be won in order to gain the support of the international community at a given moment.

In this war of images, Divjak was widely used by the Sarajevo government to show the world that Bosnia's multiculturalism was reflected even in its army and that one of its most important leaders was of Serbian origin. Divjak was criticized for this by his sons, who eventually left Sarajevo:

Their vision was different, more disillusioned than mine. They thought it wasn't their war, and it wasn't mine either. [...] "They made you second in command of the army, but it's just to use you. You're the only one going to the front lines. Why are you doing all this? They're using you as an alibi to say they have a Serb in the general staff and that the army is multi-ethnic. But what's in it for you? You'll end up being used and those who put you on the back

today will forget you." They thought I was naive [164].

And Divjak is forced to admit that he was indeed used by Sarajevo officials as a propaganda tool to highlight the multicultural nature of the Bosnian army:

It is true that, as early as 1992, I felt that there was a lot of insistence on showing off the

Serbian general of the Armija. As a joke, I compared myself to the little bear that the Gypsies of my childhood made dance in the village square when they announced their show. The term *Ikebana* came to me later, in 1994, when Izetbegovic began to sideline me. I was no longer attending important staff meetings or meetings with delegations from Muslim countries. On the other hand, when Western milit s arrived, I was summoned as if I

were a decoration on the table [165].

Divjak defends himself against this accusation, however, arguing that, despite appearances, he always managed to control the situation and remain himself:

But anyone who believes that I served as a front for a certain multi-ethnicity is mistaken. When I joined the Bosnian Territorial Defense on April 8, 1992, I made a decision that was entirely my own, without being influenced by anyone else. This choice was not contradicted by what happened later. It was a great honor for me to represent the multi-ethnic and multi-religious army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, even though it was already almost gone by the end of 1993. I wanted to see it that way, but I was aware that the reality was different. But you can only manipulate those who don't see reality.

It was my superiors who ended up looking like fools, not me. They were the ones who behaved contrary to what they preached and showed narrow-mindedness and a lack of openness.

The way I was sidelined says a lot about them, not about me [\[166\]](#).

\*

Regardless of how Divjak managed to deal with his ethical and psychological conflict, we cannot ignore the fact that he found himself in a situation where he was not alone, like other characters in this book, but at the center of a web of conflicting representations. When he spoke of "the great honor of representing the multi-ethnic and multi-religious army of Bosnia and Herzegovina," he clearly suggested that the strength of his commitment was partly due to the image he was likely to convey to others. Those who exploited this image understood that it could be decisive in their search for external support.

This situation makes Divjak an exception among many of the figures mentioned here, who sought to remain anonymous. This is true of the Righteous, both because their rescue work required discretion and because their character, as we have seen, led them to refrain from seeking recognition even after the end of the conflict. And if

resistance fighters such as Cordier, Gary, and the members of the White Rose became famous, it was after the end of the events in which they were involved, which required them to live in hiding.

Their commitment was therefore not strengthened by the image others had of them, or it was strengthened by the small group of people with whom they acted, close friends or comrades in arms or rescue workers, unlike Divjak, who was able to draw some of his strength from the positive image that the inhabitants of Sarajevo had of him, or, conversely, from the hostile image that his opponents spread about him to harm him.

However, this question of self-image is not insignificant in terms of commitment, and in my opinion it can play a decisive role in what I have called internal constraints. The decisive image is undoubtedly the one that these women and men had of themselves, and sometimes, as in Vann Nath's case, it is enough to spur them into action. But this image we have of ourselves is often caught up in a dialectical relationship with the image others have of us, which, depending on the circumstances, can either reinforce or weaken it.

To say that Divjak owed part of his moral strength to the image people had of him in Sarajevo and abroad does not diminish the remarkable nature of his commitment, but it does help to clarify certain factors that may have been decisive. It could undoubtedly be said that his decision on April 8, however obvious it may have been to him, allowed him, to use Terestchenko's expression, to increase his sense of self-presence. And that all those who supported him with their gaze, whether with recognition or hatred, acted as a support system, reinforcing this presence within [him \[167\]](#).

\*

The fact of belonging to a group and feeling supported by it cannot therefore be ignored in a decision such as the one I am considering. This was the case at the École Normale Supérieure from February 1943 onwards, where several classes of students, including mine,



were

faced with the real threat of being sent to Germany. After trying to escape the conflict, they were finally forced to make a decision.

With the creation of the STO, a significant number of young French people joined the Resistance, or at least became openly opposed to the

Vichy regime. The prospect of being sent to the enemy, combined with the general feeling that the war was now lost, led them to accept risks they had not taken before.

What Stéphane Israël's book shows is that the students of the École Normale Supérieure—particularly those of the class of 1942, to which I belonged—now found themselves at a real crossroads and could not

We can no longer content ourselves with looking the other way and taking refuge in books. Unless we agree to go and work in Germany, we have the choice between joining the Resistance and one of the solutions that Jérôme Carcopino, the Vichy director of the École normale, is trying to put in place to spare us from [leaving \[168\]](#).

However, the solutions he proposed to escape Germany should not be dismissed out of hand. With the exception of working in the mines, some possibilities, such as taking up a position in Spain, or, better still, remaining at the École normale in a more or less fictitious job, were interesting opportunities, the ideal being to be exempted from the STO, not temporarily, but permanently.

This seemed to me the wisest choice. Taking advantage of my poor health, I gathered all the necessary medical certificates and got myself appointed to the library of the École normale in the spring of [1943](#) I appreciated this compromise solution for several reasons, primarily because it allowed me to avoid a stay in Germany, which would have made me feel like I was participating in the Nazi war effort, something I absolutely refused to do.

But even more than that, by circumventing the STO—by staying in the same place and only changing my assignment—I felt that I was not serving Germany or the Vichy regime in any way, and that I was playing my part, in a modest way, in a form of resistance. It is a decision that seems to me both reasonable, consistent with who I am, and not without elegance. What better place than a library, when one

believes in the power of the mind, to discreetly circulate books hostile to the regime in power, or even to serve as a mailbox for more committed comrades?

I sometimes wonder if I could have gone further and if the support of my circle of friends, or even a decisive encounter with a comrade involved in the Resistance, could have pushed me into outright opposition to the Vichy [regime](#). In any case, I believe there is a scenario in which I would be likely to react, namely if one of my comrades encouraged me to leave, sharing their strength of conviction with me and providing me with the support that enables some people to surpass themselves.

I like to imagine this as I wander among the covered shelves. books, that among all those who chose to leave France at that time,

Stéphane Piobetta, one of the most heroic among them, who had come

to borrow books from the library in June 1943 and with whom I had become friends, suggested that I go with him to North Africa. I found within myself the resources to follow him [\[171\]](#). But another surprise awaited me.

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My father had both more courage and less success. Arrested by the Germans with three comrades while trying to join the maquis in the south of France, he did not escape the STO and was sent with them to

Lübeck on the Baltic coast, where he worked at the railway station until August 1944.

## CHAPTER III

### OF GOD

To the strength drawn from within oneself and that drawn from the gaze of others, it seems necessary to add, as a final hypothesis for understanding how the transition to action takes place at the decisive moment, that which some of the resistance fighters mentioned here clearly drew from their belief in God.

From the theology professor in Milgram's experiment to André and Martha Trocmé, from Sophie Scholl to Sousa Mendes and Vann Nath, many of the opponents featured in this book, despite their different religions, were believers, and this fact cannot be ignored. Can we not assume that their faith gave them the extra strength that I personally lacked to overcome my fear and commit myself more resolutely than by hiding among books?

\*

On April 6, 1994, after the assassination of President Habyarimana, whose plane was hit by a missile, a systematic extermination of the Tutsi by the Hutu began in Rwanda with the support of the government in power, which claimed around 800,000 victims in just

over three months.

Compared to the two previous cases, the Rwandan genocide was unique in the extreme speed with which everything unfolded, since the large-scale massacres—admittedly planned long in advance—were carried out in just 100 days, forcing those who wanted to save lives to decide to intervene.

But Rwanda during the genocide had the same characteristics as Cambodia under Pol Pot, namely an atmosphere of absolute terror that inevitably weighed heavily on the decision-making process. Once the genocide began, it was very difficult for Hutus not to participate in the massacres, and it was out of the question for them to express their opposition, particularly by hiding Tutsis. Jean Hatzfeld thus showed what those who dared to disobey orders risked. opposition, especially by hiding Tutsis. Jean Hatzfeld has shown what those who dared to disobey orders were exposed to [\[172\]](#).

This general atmosphere of terror could explain why it is difficult to find any Righteous Among the Nations still alive in [Rwanda \[173\]](#), but any conclusion would be hasty, as rescuers, as we have seen, are not inclined to draw attention to themselves. In any case, it makes the courage of those who tried, at considerable risk, to save Tutsis all the more remarkable [\[174\]](#).

Their courage was all the more remarkable given that they did so alone, living under constant threat of denunciation, unable to talk about it to those around them and without access to an organized support network such as that created by Pastor Trocmé and his

companions in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. And so, even more than other resistance fighters in this essay, they were left to their own devices.

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In a 2010 documentary, "Au nom du père, de tous, du ciel [175], Marie-Violaine Brincard interviewed five of these Rwandan Righteous, who, at the risk of their lives, undertook to save Tutsis and Hutus hostile to the massacres during the genocide, and who recount their experiences on camera.

Joseph Habineza, the first of the Rwandan Righteous to be interviewed, explains that he followed the example of his father, who taught him to love the Tutsi and live with them. His father committed himself to defending them during the genocide and was struck with a machete, but it is not known whether he died or not. Joseph Habineza, for his part, took in Tutsi who were under threat, prompting a punitive expedition by Hutu, who destroyed his house, massacred those who had taken refuge there, and broke his knee with a spiked club. He lost his leg in the attack.

Joséphine Dusabimana saved many Tutsis during the genocide, despite her fear, the certainty that if she was discovered she would be killed along with those she saved, and her husband's reluctance. She was helped by her cousin, who took the Tutsis across the river in a

boat. She In particular, she saved the life of a young boy, Thomas, whom she

entrusted to her own parents—who live far from her home—and whom she recovered alive at the end of the massacres.

Léonard Reagan Rurangwa, who says he was influenced by fictional characters such as Tarzan, was the most influential member of a group of friends when the genocide began, and he convinced them to help him save Tutsis. He recalls in particular the case of a little girl, now a teenager, who appears in the film alongside him. Feeling threatened after the genocide and not wanting to suffer the same fate as the other rescuers, most of whom are now dead, he decided to leave the village where he lived. He regularly testifies against the perpetrators of the genocide in court.

Finally, we are introduced to Augustin Kamegeri and Marguerite Nyirarukundo. During the genocide, with the help of a few people, they organized the rescue of a large number of Tutsis, helping them cross the river near their homes and find refuge on the Idjwi Islands, which are part of Congo. Augustin's son recounts how he transported them by canoe at night. We see Augustin playing and drinking with friends, some of whom he saved and who show him their gratitude. The film ends with a strange scene in which Augustin enters the river and immerses himself completely, declaring that he is baptizing himself "in the name of the Father, of all, of heaven."



What is striking about these five testimonies, conveyed in the simple words of people who are not educated, is the feeling we often encounter in heroes and the Righteous, *that they could not have done otherwise*. As Joséphine Dusabimana says:

How could I see someone arrive and refuse them entry?

And Augustin Kamegeri's son, when asked how he overcame his fear when his father asked him to help, gave a similarly elliptical answer:

We couldn't refuse.

As in other cases of the Righteous, saving others appears like a matter of course that cannot even be justified. The film's power lies in the fact that we find ourselves very close to this inner constraint that allows obstacles, including fear, to be overcome. We are brought closer because these Righteous speak directly to us and because their cultural background makes it even more obvious that they have nothing to say about their actions and—the statement exhausting itself in its own tautology—that they saved Tutsis because Tutsis had to be saved.

Augustin Kamegeri goes even further, asserting that responsibility for the genocide lies with those who possessed intelligence and that he might have behaved like them if he had been intelligent. Because he was not intelligent, he did not understand what was happening around him during the killings, and it was this lack of understanding that, in a

way, prevented him from becoming a criminal himself:

We didn't know what was happening.

Those who had been educated knew. How could I

have known that people had to be killed?

It was the intelligent ones who killed, who brought about these

horrors. If I had been intelligent, I might have killed too.

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However, it would not be true to say that the actions of these righteous

people were completely unmotivated and that they had nothing to say

about them. Even if they cannot be fully explained by faith, these actions

also take on meaning in relation to a religion that permeates the lives of

those who dared to carry them out. It is not others, then, who give rise to

or reinforce the sense of self-presence, but God.

Each of the witnesses, at one point or another, refers to God, not as an abstract entity, but as an inner breath or voice that gave them the strength to act at the decisive moment:

Joseph Habineza:

If the others had acted like us, if everyone had saved at least one or two people, it would have been better. God would have heard us.

Joséphine Dusabimana:

It was difficult to tell my family that we were hiding a Tutsi. It was a sin. I said to myself:

"If God wills it, he will leave here safe and sound and be saved when he reaches Zaire."

Léonard Reagan Rurangwa:

The Tutsi began going to the church because the militiamen told them to take refuge there. In fact, it was to kill them. Fortunately for them, I knew the plans of those who had started killing outside. That's when I decided to help them and, with God's help, I began rescuing those who were being threatened for no reason.

Or Marguerite Nyirarukundo, who recalls a call she says she received from God:

When you hear God's voice, you cannot abandon someone. What has been built by God will not be destroyed by the wind.

Or their son, talking about transportation on the Idjwi Islands:

At night especially, we were afraid of running into someone. But, as my father says, the spirit of God inspired us.

It is therefore not inconceivable that faith played a decisive role in the courage shown by these Righteous in saving Tutsis, and more generally among a number of the resistance figures encountered in this

book, but perhaps in more original forms than one might expect.

Believing in God does not imply a commitment based on the expectation of a future reward or fear of punishment, rewards that are never mentioned in these testimonies. Faith comes instead in the form of a conviction that human beings are sacred. This certainty was already evident in the behavior of the Trocmés, leading them to reject

all aggressive behavior, even toward their [enemies](#) , or in Sousa

Mendes' decision to save all those who asked for his help.

This sacredness of human beings is reflected in the passage that closes the film, in which Augustin Kamegeri criticizes the feelings of jealousy that drive human beings:

People will never be equal. Not even in heaven. Not even in heaven. Man is God. Who told you that God is not a man? What if he is a man? What do you believe? That God is not a man? Who told you that?

In Augustin Kamegeri's view, there is indeed an afterlife, but it is on earth that everything is played out and there is nothing more to hope for. It is undoubtedly in this sense that we should understand the statement that not only is God a man—a classic reference in

Christian religion to the Incarnation—but that man is God. And perhaps the final scene, in which Augustin Kamegeri baptizes himself, should be understood in the same way.

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To say, with Augustin Kamegeri, that there is something divine in man—and that he is therefore sacred—can be understood in two ways, depending on whether one is a believer or not.

For a believer, the phrase means that this force, which enables us to overcome fear and forge a unique path, is a sign of God's presence in each of us. This is undoubtedly the feeling of these Rwandan Righteous, whose lives are marked by a personal dialogue with God, whose calls they hear and who gives them the strength to fight.

But the idea of the divinity of man is not to be rejected by a non-believer, or by a dissident believer such as Kamegeri. It emphasizes the fact that the inner compulsion we have seen at work in many resistance fighters remains something of a *mystery*. A mystery, first of all, for those who experience this incomprehensible force and cannot find the words to describe it, as if it were beyond what can be imagined or expressed.

But it is also a mystery to all those who, as I have tried to do here, attempt to understand how, contrary to their personal interests and

often at the risk of their lives, women and men switch to the side of commitment, even though their behavior sometimes remains inexplicable, even to themselves.

To speak of mystery does not imply that the paths that open up in one direction or another—at the tipping point where the crystal cracks and the potential personality emerges—are completely inexplicable. On the contrary, I have tried to show as precisely as possible the intertwining forces that lead individuals to take one path or another.

Rather, evoking mystery implies recognizing that there is something beyond explanation, what Freud would call the *navel of interpretation*, which is not only inevitable but must even be

respected because it lies at the heart of what it means to be human and

of our freedom. While we can come very close to the tipping point, it remains inaccessible, like a place of mystery within each of us where the opposing forces that we are the result of and that drive us toward decisions intermingle.

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Naturally, this reference to the ultimate mystery at the center of our being is not insignificant in my argument. It serves to support me in the comforting illusion that despite everything that encourages me to do nothing, like most of my comrades—fear outweighing the forces of life—I can still find the strength to mobilize and do a little more than stay in the library of the École normale waiting for liberation.

My father, after all, did eventually join the Resistance. It is true that he had little choice, since he did not have the alternatives that the École offered me, and that path led him to Germany. Nevertheless, there are many situations in the family where we end up reacting, even if it takes us a little time to do [so](#) .

Can faith in God, whether understood in the traditional, largely anthropomorphic way, or in the more dissident way of Augustine Kamegeri, provide, beyond the forces contained within oneself and the support of others, a specific help that enables commitment and helps

me take the plunge?

I cannot rule out that it played a role in the case of my father, who was a devout Christian. Raised in this religion, but agnostic rather than a believer, I am not sure that my uncertain faith is enough to overcome my fear. It may make me feel guilty for doing nothing, but it does not necessarily encourage me to get involved.

As I said, I believe more in the strength that a group of friends or an older comrade like Stéphane Piobetta could give me. But they would have to reach out to me first, which is rather contradictory to the necessary discretion with which resistance movements—and this is the case at the École normale—are usually conducted.



Better still, I believe I would be even more inclined to get involved if a woman asked me or suggested that I do so. I am sensitive to the image I project in such circumstances, and I cannot rule out the possibility that I would find the means to surpass myself. After all, according to his own words, wasn't it for the love of a woman and to obey her orders that Gary found the strength to leave France and continue the fight?

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I've noticed her for some time now at the library, where she regularly spends time, and I now look forward to her visits. I had the opportunity to glance at her card and I know that, like the other students at the École normale de filles, she has the right to borrow books from the École des garçons.

I also know that she is writing a thesis on Kafka, and to give myself

the best chance, I have started reading all of the Czech writer's works,

which I had never heard of before. I now know enough to hold a

conversation about *The Trial* and show her that we have a lot in

common. As she comes to the library more and more often and I make

sure I'm at the counter every time she returns her books, which gives

me a chance to say a few words to her, I finally ask her to join me for

a drink at the brasserie on the corner of Rue d'Ulm and Rue Gay-

Lussac, and that's where we

start talking about Kafka.

# EPILOGUE

As we can see after this journey through time, during which I have tried as honestly as possible to explore the lost realm of possibilities, there is no reason for me to rejoice in the way I behaved in the dramatic circumstances I have recalled.

Admittedly, faithful to the choices of my family and the convictions of the group of intellectuals to which I belong, I did not subscribe to the ideology of the Vichy regime. And, like many French people, I was constantly shocked by the spectacle of exclusion and persecution practiced against Jews and other categories of the population.

But being shocked does not mean committing oneself to the point of risking one's life. That is the whole problem with taking action, which I have tried to highlight here. This is not a continuous process in which a series of disagreements eventually leads to taking the plunge, but rather a real leap into the unknown, beyond fear, which few human beings are capable of taking at the ultimate moment.

Unless an inner compulsion becomes so pressing that there is no other choice. I doubt that this irrepressible demand, I doubt—even if I secretly hope that the mystery in each of us would have worked in my favor—that it would have been enough in my case, but there is no reason not to dream of the strength that can be found in the most cautious individuals through the unknowns encountered in libraries and through the voices of writers who have passed away.

Deploring the inadequacy of this life force is in any case less important than thinking about ways to sustain it. The question of how I would have behaved in this possible world where I was born thirty years earlier is of limited interest, except that it is, in my view, the best way to reflect—from my own perspective and not in the abstract—on the modalities of engagement.

However, whatever the essential element of mystery that *ultimately* determines commitment, the figures of resistance evoked here offer valuable lessons that deserve to be passed on. One of the major themes is the *capacity for disobedience*, so well illustrated by Sousa Mendes, or, more broadly, the *ability to break out of the framework* imposed by society as a whole.

This ability to step outside the box, which is not just an administrative framework but an unconscious mindset, allows us to invent, through genuine *creative work*, new paths that would not normally emerge. In this sense, there is more here than just an escape from the framework; there is a reshaping of the whole of reality, a reshaping that makes it appear different from what it was, since it is now open to transformations that were previously invisible.

This ability does not only imply a re-creation of the world, traversed by new lines of force that reshape its landscape, it also means a re-creation of oneself. Accepting loss necessarily implies a change in the subject and their relationship to the world, and above all to themselves, which only a privileged few are able to assume.

\*

This creative ability enabled the resistance fighters whose stories I have followed here to discover or develop a part of themselves that they probably did not know existed. Nothing in Daniel Cordier's

background predisposed him to become Jean Moulin's secretary, nor did Sousa Mendes have any inclination to disobey the government he represented, nor did the Rwandan Righteous have any inclination to save lives. So there is indeed another self within each of us.

I could have, contrary to the choices made here, studied this unknown part of ourselves, which I have proposed to call the *potential personality*, in women and men who took the opposite path when confronted with the same general crisis of values as those whose destinies I have studied here. But the radical difference in their paths would have illustrated this duality just as well, albeit in the opposite way.

Those of us who, like me, did not switch to one side or the other, or have moved only cautiously between obstacles, are not necessarily devoid of this potential personality. But this personality, characterized in them by a form of apathy, is more indecisive and is therefore separated by a smaller gap from the everyday personality to which they and others have access.

And, above all, it is at the heart of a concrete historical situation—one that is impossible to truly experience—that our true potential personality is revealed, that is, the ultimate mystery of who we are beyond even our unconscious life. And this other self, beyond all the reconstructions that scientific laws allow us to carry out, is virtually inaccessible, except perhaps, but with unlikely results, through fiction.

Indeed, however uncertain it may be in practice and in its results, the approach of time travel, which I have attempted to inaugurate in this book, deserves, in my opinion, to be extended and could find applications in other historical contexts, whatever the hazards and difficulties that weigh on its practical organization.

I have limited myself here to the specific question of how I would have behaved during the last world war if I had been born in 1922, and in doing so, I have retained most of the characteristics that I have today, with a few exceptions intended to make the journey possible.

But one could imagine using this practice for other, more distant periods in history, and there is nothing to prevent us, with a few ideological adjustments, from asking ourselves what our attitude would have been if we had lived through the Revolution, if we had stayed at the court of King Louis XIV, or if we had taken part in the Crusades. Nor is there anything to prevent us from traveling into the future.

This variability of the individual, experimentally subjected to new situations designed to reveal themselves to themselves, should not be overlooked from a scientific point of view, as it allows us to better understand, by immersing ourselves in history and removing ourselves from the reductive context of the present day, the reasons for the choices made by our ancestors.



reductive of present present what that, beyond the

veneer of contingencies, we are in truth.

[1] Louis Malle and Patrick Modiano, *Lacombe Lucien* [1974],

Gallimard, coll. "Folio plus classiques," 2008, p. 71.

[2] "If we throw a crystal on the ground, it breaks, but not arbitrarily; it breaks along its cleavage planes into pieces whose boundaries, although invisible, were nevertheless determined in advance by the structure of the crystal. Such cracked and shattered structures are also what mentally ill people are like. (Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, PUF, coll. "Quadrige," 2010, p. 60.)[\[Ret\]](#)

[3] Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, Calmann-Lévy, 1994, p. 39.[\[Ret\]](#)

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 21.[\[Ret\]](#)

[5] In variants where the "teacher," while hearing the student's cries, is not in the same room as him and does not see him suffering. The figure drops to 40% if he sees him suffering (*Ibid.*, pp. 52-55).[\[Ret\]](#)

[6] *Ibid.*[\[Ret\]](#)

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.[\[Ret\]](#)

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 68.[\[Ret\]](#)

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 23.[\[Ret\]](#)

[10] A more or less similar experiment was recently conducted on French television with even more disturbing results.[\[Ret\]](#)

[11] Stanley Milgram, *op. cit.*, p. 21.[\[Ret\]](#)

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 133 ff.[\[Ret\]](#)

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 146 ff.[\[Ret\]](#)

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 19.[\[Ret\]](#)

[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 24–25.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 25.[\[Ret\]](#)

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 17.[\[Ret\]](#)

[18] *Ordinary Men*, Les Belles Lettres, 1992; cited edition:

Tallandier, coll. "Texte," 2007, p. 41 ff. [\[Ret\]](#)

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 43 ff.[\[Ret\]](#)

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 92.[\[Ret\]](#)

[21] *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.[\[Ret\]](#)

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 106.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 107.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114.[\[Ret\]](#)

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 117.[\[Ret\]](#)

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 118. [\[Ret\]](#)

[28] On this term, see Harald Welzer, *Les Exécuteurs. Des hommes*

*normaux aux meurtriers de masse* (The Executioners: From

Normal Men to Mass [Murderers](#))[[Ret\]](#), Gallimard, 2007.

[29] Browning, *op. cit.*, p. 144.[\[Ret\]](#)

[30] "This does not mean that men did not have a choice; simply that this choice was not offered to them as openly or explicitly as it was to Jozefow. In Lomazy, they had to go to great lengths to escape

the work of killing" (*ibid.*, p. 145). [Ret]

[31] *Ibid.*[Ret]

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 147 ff.[Ret]

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 159 ff.[Ret]

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 169 ff.[Ret]

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 183 ff.[Ret]

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 191.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 191 ff.[Ret]

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 218.[Ret]

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 123.[Ret]

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 243.[Ret]

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 251.[Ret]

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 256.[Ret]

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 127.[Ret]

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 270.[Ret]

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] Solomon Asch's experiment, conducted in 1951, aimed to

demonstrate the importance of group conformity. A group of

students, all of whom were in on the experiment except for one,

who was the test subject, were seated in a room and shown vertical

lines, namely a reference line and three other lines, which they had

to compare to the first line. The student whose reactions are being

tested is the last to give their answer. If all the students before them give the same wrong answer—

a line that is clearly different in length from the reference line—he will tend to follow suit and also give the wrong answer, denying the visual evidence. See the analysis of this experiment in Harald Welzer, *op. cit.*, p. 96 ff.[\[Ret\]](#)

[48] Philippe Breton proposed the word "refusenik" to describe those who, without being true members of the resistance, refused to obey a criminal order (*Les Refusants. Comment refuse-t-on de devenir un exécuteur ?*, La Découverte, 2009).[\[Ret\]](#)

[49] *Alias Caracalla*, Gallimard, 2009, p. 15.[\[Ret\]](#)

[50] *Ibid.*[\[Ret\]](#)

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 17.[\[Ret\]](#)

[52] *Ibid.*, p. 27.[\[Ret\]](#)

[53] *Ibid.*, p. 88.[\[Ret\]](#)

[54] *Ibid.*, p. 265.[\[Ret\]](#)

[55] *Ibid.*, p. 911.[\[Ret\]](#)

[56] *Ibid.*, p. 48.[\[Ret\]](#)

[57] *Ibid.*, p. 49.[\[Ret\]](#)

[58] Having obtained permission from Alexandre Diego Gary, son and heir of Romain Gary, to quote his work, but not from Roberte Leïla Chellabi, I will only briefly mention the passages commented on here, referring the reader to the "Folio" edition of *La Promesse de l'aube* (Gallimard, 1960: coll "Folio . [1973](#))[\[Ret\]](#)

[59] *The Promise of Dawn*, *op. cit.*, p. 300.[\[Ret\]](#)

[60] *Ibid.*, p. 255.[\[Ret\]](#)

[61] *Ibid.*, p. 279.[\[Ret\]](#)

[62] *Ibid.*, p. 280.[\[Ret\]](#)

[63] *Ibid.*, p. 285.[\[Ret\]](#)

[64] *Ibid.*, p. 286.[\[Ret\]](#)

[65] *Ibid.*, p. 288.[\[Ret\]](#)

[66] *Ibid.*, p. 290.[\[Ret\]](#)

[67] *Ibid.*

[68] *Ibid.*, p. 283.[\[Ret\]](#)

[69] *Ibid.*

[70] See my book *Il était deux fois Romain Gary*, PUF, 1990.

[\[Return\]](#)

[71] Romain Gary, *op. cit.*, p. 296.[\[Ret\]](#)

[72] See *Il était deux fois Romain Gary*, *op. cit.*[\[Ret\]](#)

[73] Romain Gary, *Les Cerfs-volants* [1980], Gallimard, coll. "Folio"  
1986, p. 282.

[74] One of those responsible for the rescues, Roger Darcissac, said:

"The truth [...] lies in the secretive nature of the people here... Your closest neighbor didn't know what was going on in your house, and

you didn't know what he was doing in his... I saw this once again at the unveiling of the commemorative plaque last June. Farmers lost in the countryside came. I learned that day, for the first time in forty years, that they too had hidden Jews!" (Philippe Boegner, *Ici*,

on a aimé les Juifs, Lattès, 1982, p. 204.)([Ret\]](#)

[75] Tzvetan Todorov, *Face à l'extrême*, Le Seuil, 2003, p. 256.[\[Ret\]](#)

[76] "That's what Magda meant when she told me, 'Helping the Jews was more important than opposing Vichy or the Nazis.'" (Philip Hallie, *Le Sang des innocents*, Stock, 1980, p. 178.)([Ret\]](#)

[77] This difference between the Righteous and heroes is echoed in another form by Philip Hallie: "Acts of conscience do not make important news—especially during a war. Only actions directly related to the national interest receive any publicity. This is why the Francs-Tireurs et Partisans de la Gauche and General de Gaulle's Secret Army were revered everywhere, albeit secretly, during the Occupation and praised to the skies afterwards. This is also why the armed resistance produced heroes such as de Gaulle himself or Jean Moulin, the leader of the Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur, who was so passionately revered. There are no such illustrious names in the history of Le Chambon. [...] The saviors of nations have many friends, but there seems to be little sympathy for the saviors of a few thousand human beings in dire straits" (*Ibid.*, p. 23).[\[Ret\]](#)

[78] *Ibid.*, p. 176. Emphasis added by the author. [\[Ret\]](#)

[79] Samuel and Pearl Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality. Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*, New York, The Free Press, 1988. I owe this reference to Michel Terestchenko's major work, *Un si fragile vernis d'humanité. Banalité du mal, banalité du bien*, La

Découverte, 2005. [\[Ret\]](#)



- [80] Samuel and Pearl Oliner, *op. cit.*, p. 6. [\[Return\]](#)
- [81] Michel Terestchenko, *op. cit.*, p. 226. [\[Ret\]](#)
- [82] Philip Hallie, *op. cit.*, p. 208. [\[Ret\]](#)
- [83] *Ibid.*, p. 211. [\[Ret\]](#)
- [84] I am using the translation proposed by Terestchenko. [\[Ret\]](#)
- [85] Samuel Oliner, *op. cit.*, p. 188. [\[Ret\]](#)
- [86] Michel Terestchenko, *op. cit.*, pp. 225-232. [\[Ret\]](#)
- [87] Daniel Batson, *The Altruism Question. Toward a Social-psychological Answer*, New York, Psychology Press, 1991. I owe this reference to Michel Terestchenko, *op. cit.* [\[Ret\]](#)
- [88] Daniel Batson, *op. cit.*, p. 114. [\[Ret\]](#)
- [89] *Ibid.* [\[Return\]](#)
- [90] *Ibid.*
- [91] *Ibid.*, pp. 116-117. [\[Ret\]](#)
- [92] Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson, *Unto others, The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 232. My translation. I owe this reference to Michel Terestchenko, *op. cit.* [\[Ret\]](#)
- [93] On the multiple forms of opposition during World War II, see Denis Peschanski, "Résistance, résilience et opinion dans la France des années noires" (Resistance, resilience, and opinion in France during the dark years): <http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00325928/fr/>
- Denis Peschanski proposes the term "resilience" to describe these

forms of opposition that cannot be integrated into the usual frameworks: "The use of the word 'resilience', proposed here in a very specific sense, makes it possible to describe behaviors of distance, refusal, and protest aimed at the occupation but not falling within the scope of the Resistance, behaviors that bear witness to and contribute to the reconstruction of individual and collective identity" (*op. cit.*, p. 1).[\[Ret\]](#)

[94] See Stéphane Israël's reference work on the ENS in Ulm during the war, *Les Normaliens dans la tourmente (1939-1945)*, Éditions rue d'Ulm, 2005.[\[Ret\]](#)

[95] Hans and Sophie Scholl, *Lettres et carnets*, Tallandier, 2008; cited edition: Le Livre de poche, p. 16. [\[Ret\]](#)

[96] Charlotte Beradt, *Rêver sous le Troisième Reich (Dreaming Under the Third Reich)*, Payot, 2004. [\[Ret\]](#)

[97] Inge Scholl, *The White Rose. Six Germans Against Nazism* [\[1955\]](#), Les Éditions de Minuit, coll. "double," 2008, p. 31.

[98] *Ibid.*, p. 75.[\[Ret\]](#)

[99] *Ibid.*[\[Ret\]](#)

[100] *Ibid.*, p. 87.[\[Ret\]](#)

[101] Hans and Sophie Scholl, *op. cit.*, p. 331.[\[Ret\]](#)

[102] *Ibid.*, p. 333.[\[Ret\]](#)

[103] *Ibid.*, p. 362.[\[Ret\]](#)

[104] *Ibid.*, p. 463.[\[Ret\]](#)

[105] On the first resistance movements at the École Normale, such as

the Vélites network, from October 1940 onwards, see Stéphane

Israël, *op. cit.*, p. 143 ff.[\[Ret\]](#)

[106] Inge Scholl, *op. cit.*, p. 129.[\[Ret\]](#)

[107] *Ibid.*, p. 129.[\[Ret\]](#)

[108] *Ibid.*, p. 121.[\[Ret\]](#)

[109] *Ibid.*, p. 135.[\[Ret\]](#)

[110] *Ibid.*, p. 106.[\[Ret\]](#)

[111] *Ibid.*, p. 121.[\[Ret\]](#)

[112] [What](#) I refer to as "autonomous thinking" is similar to what

Lawrence Kohlberg calls the "postconventional" level of morality.

See Harald Welzer, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

[113] José-Alain Fralon, *Le Juste de Bordeaux*, Mollat, 1998, p. 49.

[\[Ret\]](#)

[114] *Ibid.*, p. 45.[\[Ret\]](#)

[115] *Ibid.*, p. 48.[\[Ret\]](#)

[116] *Ibid.*, p. 49.[\[Ret\]](#)

[117] *Ibid.*, p. 50.[\[Ret\]](#)

[118] *Ibid.* [\[Back\]](#)

[119] *Ibid.*, pp. 51-61.[\[Ret\]](#)

[120] *Ibid.*, pp. 65–70. [\[Return\]](#)

[121] *Ibid.*, p. 71.[\[Ret\]](#)

[122] [Ibid.](#)

[123] *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.[\[Ret\]](#)

[124] *Ibid.*, p. 51.[\[Ret\]](#)

[125] *Ibid.*, p. 52.[Ret]

[126] On what he calls "compartmentalization" or "fragmentation,"

Tzvetan Todorov writes: "This compartmentalization of action itself

and the bureaucratic specialization it causes are the basis for the lack of responsibility that characterizes those who carried out the 'final solution', but also all other agents of the totalitarian state. [...] None of the elements in the chain [...] feels responsible for what is being done: the compartmentalization of work has suspended moral consciousness." " (*Face à l'extrême, op. cit.*, p. 184.)[Ret]

[127] One could also say that the refugees Sousa Mendes dealt with

were not part of what Harald Welzer calls his

"universe of obligation" (*op. cit.*).[Ret]

[128] On the concept of "frame of reference," see Harald Welzer, *op.*

*cit.*, p. 16 and p. 31 ff.[Ret]

[129] Bibb Latané and John Darley, *The Unresponsive Bystander.*

*Why doesn't he help?* New York, Appleton-Century Crofts, 1970. I

owe this reference to Michel Terestchenko, *op. cit.*, pp. 164-179.

The *New York Times*' version of the murder, according to which 38 people did not intervene, has been questioned, without invalidating

the work of Latané and Darley. [Ret]

[130] There have been similar cases abroad in terms of the number of

people saved, such as those of Raoul Wallenberg and Sugihara

Chiune. [Ret]

- [131] See Carcopino's speech to students at the École Normale Supérieure in December 1940: "Do not defy public opinion. No labels, no propaganda. [...] Our salvation will not come from rhetorical improvisations but from the constancy of our efforts to loyally carry out our duties. Our salvation will be professorial or it will not be at all." " (Stéphane Israël, *op. cit.*, p. 67.)[\[Ret\]](#)
- [132] Quoted by Tzvetan Todorov, in *Mémoire du mal, tentation du bien*, Robert Laffont, 2000, p. 122.[\[Ret\]](#)
- [133] Margarete Buber-Neumann, *Milena*, Le Seuil, 1986, p. 11.[\[Ret\]](#)
- [134] *Ibid.*, p. 12.[\[Ret\]](#)
- [135] *Ibid.*, p. 202.[\[Ret\]](#)
- [136] *Ibid.*, p. 21.[\[Ret\]](#)
- [137] *Ibid.*[\[Ret\]](#)
- [138] *Ibid.*, p. 23.[\[Ret\]](#)
- [139] *Ibid.*, p. 254.[\[Ret\]](#)

[140] *Ibid.*, p. 256.[\[Ret\]](#)

[141] *Ibid.*[\[Ret\]](#)

[142] For the itinerary of these students, see Stéphane Israël, *op. cit.*, p. 232 ff. On the difficulties encountered in crossing into Spain, see Henri Cabannes' account on his website:

[henri.cabannes.free.fr/](http://henri.cabannes.free.fr/) [\[Ret\]](#)

[143] Harald Welzer, *op. cit.*, p. 20. See also the examples, taken from several mass murders, given by Jacques Sémelin in *Purifier et détruire. Usages politiques des massacres et génocides*, Le Seuil, 2006, p. 175.[\[Ret\]](#)

[144] Some killed several thousand prisoners. See the case of Houy in Vann Nath, *Dans l'enfer de Tuol Sleng*, Calmann-Lévy, 2008, pp. 175-183.[\[Ret\]](#)

[145] Rithy Panh, *S-21, la machine de mort khmère rouge* (S-21, the Khmer Rouge killing machine), INA/Arte France, 2004.[\[Ret\]](#)

[146] *Ibid.* [\[Return\]](#)

[147] Vann Nath, *op. cit.*, p. 115.[\[Ret\]](#)

[148] *Ibid.*, p. 117.[\[Ret\]](#)

[149] *Ibid.*

[150] *Ibid.*, p. 118.[\[Ret\]](#)

[151] Michel Terestchenko, *op. cit.*, p. 290.[\[Ret\]](#)

[152] *Ibid.*, p. 291.[\[Ret\]](#)

[153] In an attempt to understand where opponents of Nazism in

Germany drew their strength, Harald Welzer writes: "The first (reason) consists in the immediate and obvious form of a banal ethic, expressed in the simple phrase: 'You can't do that! ' Such a basic ethic presupposes a high degree of psychological autonomy, because ultimately, the decision not to kill is an attitude that radically departs from the social and cultural environment and, moreover, can cause trouble for those who adopt it" (*op. cit.*, p. 277).[\[Ret\]](#)

[154] Stéphane Israël, *op. cit.*, p. 158.[\[Ret\]](#)

[155] *Compulsory Labor Service*. This term refers to the requisitioning of French citizens during World War II who were forced to go to Germany to work.[\[Ret\]](#)

[156] *Sarajevo, mon amour*, Buchet-Chastel, 2004, p. 55.[\[Ret\]](#)

[157] *Ibid.*, p. 75.[\[Ret\]](#)

[158] *Ibid.*, p. 76.[\[Ret\]](#)

[159] *Ibid.*

[160] *Ibid.* Not to mention the risks that staying in Sarajevo posed to the families of those who made that choice.[\[Ret\]](#)

[161] As an example of his marginalization, Divjak recounts how he was kept away by the military from the construction of a tunnel under the airport and how he only found out about it thanks to a journalist who had used it himself (*Ibid.*, p. 169).[\[Ret\]](#)

[162] *Ibid.*, p. 75.[\[Ret\]](#)

[163] *Ibid.*, p. 197.[\[Ret\]](#)

[164] *Ibid.*, p. 195.[Ret]

[165] *Ibid.*[Ret]

[166] *Ibid.*, p. 196.[Ret]

[167] Harald Welzer notes: "Many of those who helped and saved victims during Nazism had a role model who supported or at least approved of their actions; in other words, they were not alone in a social environment that disagreed with them, but could be assured of a certain amount of support" (*op. cit.*, p. 277).[Ret]

[168] Stéphane Israël, *op. cit.*, pp. 197-239.[Ret]

[169] " Many students were officially assigned to reinforce the teaching staff... at the École Normale Supérieure. For the school, this was a real godsend: the laboratories for scientists and the library for literary students became the legal assignment of several École Normale students." (Stéphane Israël, *Ibid.*, p. 223.)[Ret]

[170] See Jean-François Revel's testimony on the role of chance encounters: "Contrary to the simplistic divisions that often prevailed later, the French people were not divided into zealous collaborators and active resistance fighters. Very quickly, a majority emerged that was hostile to collaboration without necessarily participating in the Resistance. My opinions and disgust therefore followed the general trend. If I took the plunge, it was both out of conviction and by chance, the chance being my encounter with Anglès." (Quoted by Stéphane Israël, *Ibid.*, p. 263.)[Ret]



[171] On Stéphane Piobetta's heroic journey, see Stéphane

Israël, *Ibid.*, pp. 235-239.[\[Ret\]](#)

[172] See Jean Hatzfeld, *Une saison de machettes* [2003], Le Seuil, coll. "Points," 2005, p. 249.[\[Ret\]](#)

[173] *Ibid.*, pp. 129-133.[\[Ret\]](#)

[174] See examples in several contributions to the collective volume *La Résistance aux génocides. De la pluralité des actes de sauvetage*, Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 2008, edited by Jacques Sémelin, Claire Andrieu, and Sarah Gensburger.[\[Ret\]](#)

[175] *Doc-net films*, 2010.[\[Ret\]](#)

[176] See Philip Hallie's testimony about André Trocmé: "Because of that priceless thing that lies behind and beyond our personal qualities, a person should not be killed because he acts badly or because he is evil. For Trocmé, every person—Jew or non-Jew, German or non-German—had a spiritual diamond at the center of their being, a living, clear, precious source that God cherished." (Philip Hallie, *op. cit.*, p. 218.) [\[Ret\]](#)

[177] Born in 1924, my mother joined the FFI (French Forces of the Interior) in 1944, then the AFAT (Women's Auxiliary Army Corps) as a nurse's [aide](#).